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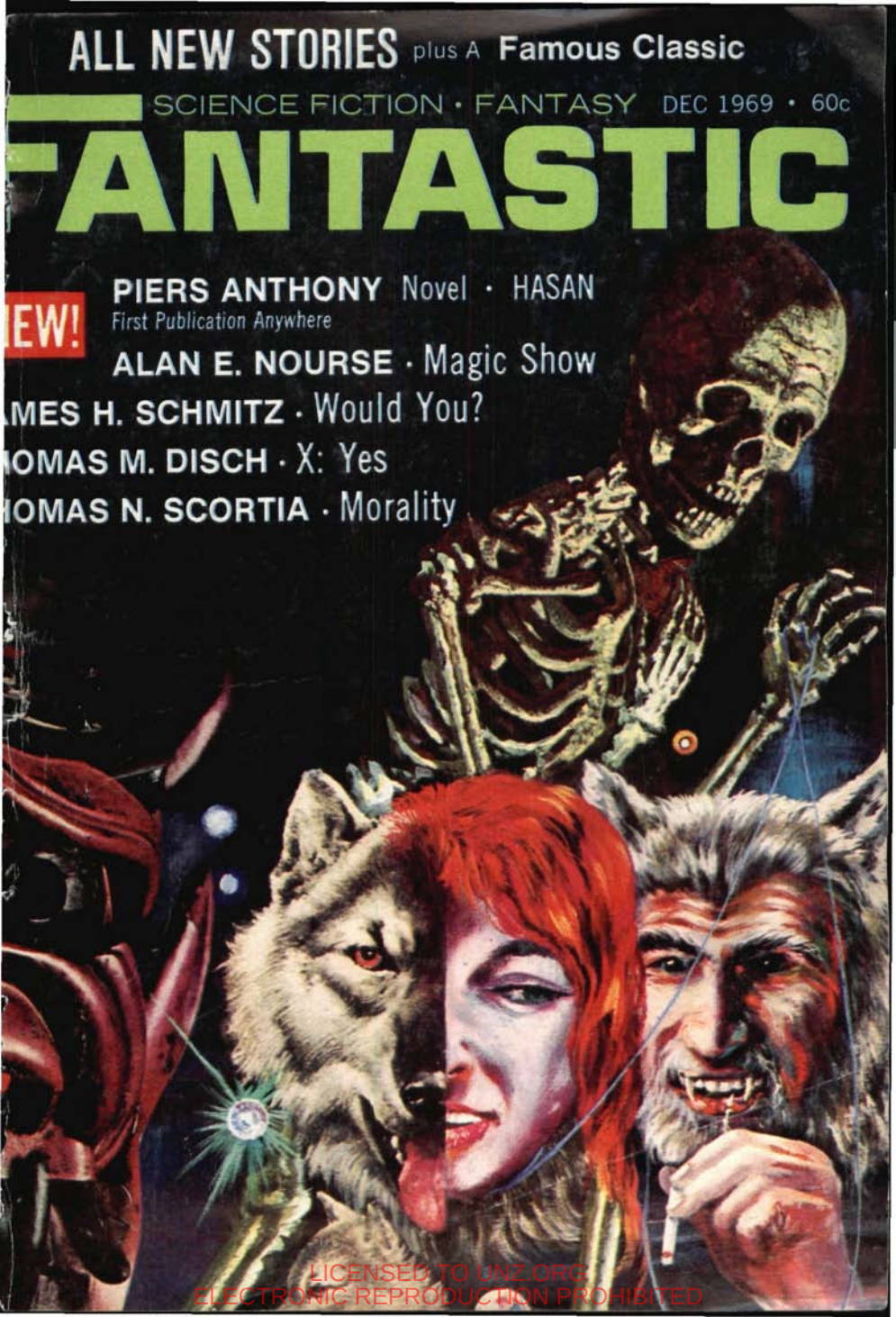

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SCIENCE FICTION•FANTASY

FANTASTIC

DECEMBER, 1969 Vol. 19, No. 2

PIERS ANTHONY'S GREATEST NOVEL
(First of Two Parts) **HASAN** 6

NEW SHORT STORIES
MORALITY, **THOMAS N. SCORTIA** 84
WOULD YOU?, **JAMES H. SCHMITZ** 91
MAGIC SHOW, **ALAN E. NOURSE** 96
x: YES, **THOMAS M. DISCH** 100

FAMOUS FANTASTIC CLASSIC
THE BIG MAN, **ROSS ROCKLYNNE** 104

NEW FEATURES
EDITORIAL, **TED WHITE** 4
FANTASY FANDOM, **PIERS ANTHONY** 125
FANTASY BOOKS, **FRITZ LEIBER** 137
ACCORDING TO YOU 141

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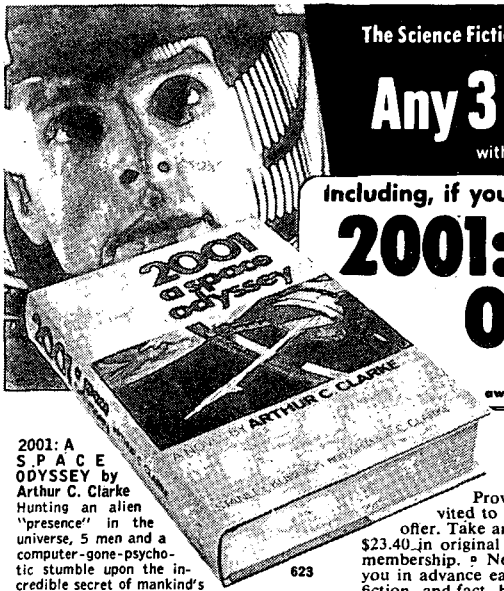

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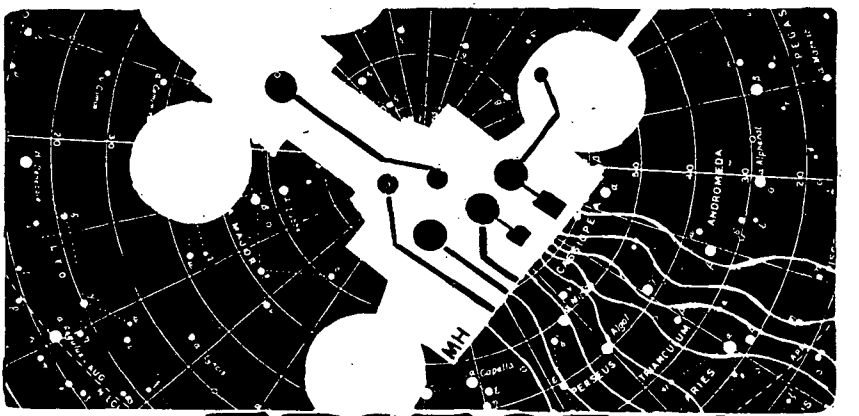

TED WHITE: EDITORIAL

Sometimes we come by the stories for this magazine by roundabout means, but I can't think of a more circuitous route than that which brought us Piers Anthony's "Hasan," the first half of which appears in this issue.

Some time around February or March, a fanzine called *Pegasus* found its way into my mailbox. Fanzines do this all the time, but this one was one I'd never encountered before, despite the fact that it was the fourth issue. (I'm sure that at any given time there are more than a hundred fanzines in some stage of publication; I try to keep up with the better ones, but must rely upon the generosity of their editors for copies of the newer ones and those which I have not seen before.) I knew the name of *Pegasus*'s editor, Joanne Burger, only vaguely—it seemed to me I'd seen letters from her in some other fanzines—and I wondered if she had a specific purpose in mind in sending me this hefty (68 pages) fanzine or whether she had simply decided to send me a sample copy. Glancing through the fanzine's pages, I encountered a long letter from Piers Anthony, in the course of which he mentioned an unpublished novel he had written. (He *has* had published a handful of talked-about novels, *Omnivore*, *Chthon*, *The Ring*, the prize-winning *Sos The Rope*, however.) "It has been bouncing for over two years," he remarked, "and I suppose that, too, will suddenly become salable if I should ever win an award." It was, he explained, "fantasy, set in Arabia of about 800 A.D., with magic and Mohemmedanism and ifrits and beautiful women, etc...."

In that same letter, he offered to loan a copy of the manuscript of the novel to Richard Delap, for possible review in the fan press. He had been carrying on a running discussion with Delap over the merits of Roger Zelazny's *Lord of Light*, which Anthony admired and Delap did not. "Since I did try a novel with a similar

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research problem, I became aware of the magnitude of the task Zelazny attempted," Anthony said of *Lord of Light*, "and felt he did a good job."

Since I myself am an admirer of *Lord of Light*, I was intrigued by this reference to an unpublished fantasy novel along somewhat similar lines (the similarities are not actually marked except in the necessarily researched background, I should add)—and I made a mental note on the subject. Later on, on the final page of *Pegasus*, editor Joanne Burger added that the Delap review had been written, to appear in *Science Fiction Review*, and that she in turn had read Piers Anthony's fantasy novel and found it "very enjoyable." I put a mental checkmark by my mental note.

I then proceeded to bury the entire subject under a mass of more pressing considerations—the clutter in my head sometimes approaching the clutter on my desk—until the April issue of *Science Fiction Review* showed up.

SF Review (an ad for which probably appears in our Classified Ads section) is one of those fanzines each issue of which I look forward to with anticipation. (I was myself a columnist for it until finding myself the editor of these magazines.) And, on page 29 of the April issue, I found Delap's review of Piers Anthony's unpublished fantasy novel.

He liked it. This in itself did not impress me unduly, since I have found our tastes do not always agree, but the fact of the review served to jolt me into a rapid shuffle through the deeper layers of my mind until I unearthed my original thoughts on the subject. I decided I wated to read the novel myself.

There are only two ways in which one customarily writes for the science fiction book market these days, and they boil down to this: 1: The book is written firs, cold, "on spec," as the saying goes, and is then offered for sale. 2: A sample portion of the book and/or an outline of the book is offered for sale, the remainder to be written once a publisher has contracted for it at an agreed-upon price, with an agreed-upon delivery date.

Generally speaking, a writer will settle for one way of writing or the other. I've heard arguments for both sides—ranging from the notion that books written to contract are "made to order" and somehow cheaper therefore, to the undeniable fact that a book written without a contract *may*, if no editor likes it, become a total liability in terms of the author's time and hard work—and I must admit that very early in my own writing career I opted to write on contract myself. I simply could not face the thought that after putting weeks and months of my time and effort into a novel it should be shelved to collect dust and no royalties thereafter. This is not a large field we enjoy, and the number of editors who buy sf or fantasy books with any consistency barely outnumber those of us who edit the remaining magazines. It is an unhappy fact, therefore, that some very good books have gone begging for unconscionably long periods of time. Alexei Panshin's *Rite of Passage* is only one recent example—in accepting his Nebula Award for the novel, Panshin thanked Ace Books for buying it after *thirteen other publishing houses turned it down*. Every editor has his bad days, sometimes finds himself overstocked, or somehow finds the better properties of particular works ellusive on occasion. This is an inescapable fact in every working writer's life. Good stories are *not* universally recognized on first sight—more's the pity.

(Continued on page 122)

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Hasan was but a feckless youth when the Persian alchemist tempted him to adventure and intrigue in far lands—but then he was yet to meet the Seven Sisters and Sana, the Bird-Maiden; to know life and love as he had scarce dreamed of it! Piers Anthony opens wide the enchantment of the land of the Arabian Nights *in a startling new fantasy epic—*

HASAN

PIERS ANTHONY

First of Two Parts
Illustrated by JEFF JONES

Chapter One

"Gold!—from copper?" Hasan's loose headcloth fluttered with his impolite laughter.

The white-bearded Persian nodded gravely. He was dressed in a handsome robe and wore sturdy sandals: a man of moderate wealth. He looked remarkably pious under his tall white turban—but Persians were in bad repute in Bassorah.

Hasan had seen the man move slowly down the street, investigating the crowded stalls on either side. This was the metalworkers' section of the city, and there were splendid displays of copper, silver and gold, all intricately wrought. Many were far more spectacular than Hasan's own—yet the Persian had paused longest here, exclaiming to himself and shaking his head.

Hasan soon concluded there was little prospect for a sale, for otherwise the customer would have demeaned the merchandise in an effort to reduce its price. He pretended to read an old book, fretfully waiting for the intruder to move on and leave the space clear for some legitimate client.

Why did he linger so? Could he be a bandit from the marshes to the north, hiding from the Caliph's justice amidst the towering reeds? Impossible; yet—

At the hour of the mid-afternoon prayer the shops cleared of customers, but the Persian remained. Hasan did not trust him. All True Believers went to prayer-call promptly. There was something furtive in the way the man's eyes shifted about, though his voice was cultured and persuasive enough.

"Young man, you are a most talented craftsman. Your father trained you well."

"I have no father," Hasan replied shortly, trying to maintain his prejudice in the face of such flattery.

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The Persian became unctuous. "Ah, the good man has joined Allah—may His name be praised. And I—I have no son." Hasan grew uncomfortable under the man's intense scrutiny. "Yet I could hardly ask for a finer son than you. Your locks are as long and black as the mane of a fine stallion. Your body is straight and strong. If I had a son like you, I would weigh him down with wealth beyond tabulation."

"Wealth?" Hasan said, too quickly.

"Provided he didn't object to a little innocent alchemy, in a good cause."

"Alchemy!" This was forbidden in Bassorah.

"How else is an honest merchant to convert common copper, or even brass, into an equal weight—of gold?" The Persian's eye was fixed upon Hasan's, challenging him to protest.

And Hasan had laughed—but not for long. "If you can do such a thing—change copper to gold—why are you shopping here? You could be rich in a single day."

The Persian shook his head in seeming sadness. "And what are riches, to one who has no son?" An artful tear coursed down one wrinkled cheek. "I have no wife, no concubine, for how am I to trust a woman, and I an alchemist? Many men have begged me to instruct them in my secret art, and I have refused them all. But love of you has gotten hold upon my heart, for you are the fairest lad in all the city, and if you will consent to become my adopted son I will teach you this skill. You will toil no more with hammer and anvil; you will sweat no more in the

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heat of the charcoal and fire. No, not one more day!"

The old man was beginning to make sense. "Teach me now," Hasan said, maintaining his guard, for he suspected a swindle in spite of his desire to be convinced.

"Tomorrow," the Persian said. "I will bring my preparations here early in the morning, and you must make ready some copper. I do not ask you to believe until you see this for yourself, my son." With that he departed, leaving Hasan both doubtful and wildly excited.

Gold! Could it be?

He was too disturbed to finish the day patiently in his stall. He closed up shop and tramped blindly out of the city, his head spinning. Gold! Key to rich living. He would dine on candied locusts and choice Persian stew. He would sip sweet sherbet from the colored glass of Sidon. He would garb himself in a robe of embroidered damask, and sleep under a sheet of finest oriental silk. Choice slave-girls would fan away the biting flies while he dispensed largesse to groveling beggars and needy holy men and thus store up great favor with Allah.

He looked up to see the dry mud flats, cut by shallow irregation ditches, that stretched from the two great rivers toward the foul marshes. The People of the Reeds dwelt in floating huts, not so far away, neighbors of unclean pigs. They sat with their vicious dogs around fires of buffalo dung. Hasan knew little of them, for civilized men were not welcome in the reedy swamps. There had been occasional skirmishes . . . .

He turned back to face the city. Gold! The cultivated fields became rosy in the glow of dusk, the hot sands saffron. Clustered date-palms beckoned in a momentary gust of wind, and swarms of sea-fowl dotted the sky, calling him to his destiny.

The sun sank, and Hasan quickly spread out his prayer-mat and kneeled with his face to the distant west of Mekkeh. He prostrated himself ritually and called upon Allah for blessing. Gold!

His old, careworn mother was cynical. Hasan sat barefooted on a cushion of the divan, leaned against the plastered wall, and smacked his lips on stale bread and sour camel's milk while she harangued him about the business of the day. She was adept at prying and wheedling information that didn't concern her, he thought, as were all women whom time had deprived of physical charm. She had the story from him almost as he entered the run-down dwelling.

"Hasan, don't pay attention to such superstitions. Beware especially of Persians, and never do anything they urge upon you. They are nothing but infidels and sharpers, and if this man pretends to alchemy you can be sure it is only to steal the money of an honest man."

"But we are poor, Mother," Hasan pointed out rudely, half lost in his dreams of wealth. The good house, now suffering from lack of repair, was all that remained of their original fortune. "How could he covet the little bit of gold I have in the shop, when he has the power to manufacture as much as he wants, from copper?"

She looked at him despairingly.

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"How can you trust the word of a stranger—a Persian!—who makes such a ridiculous promise? Have you forgotten already the leeches and loafers who promised you their undying friendship—until the wealth your father left was exhausted catering to their expensive tastes? And where are these friends now? Where would *you* be now, were it not for the kindness of your father's friend, the goldsmith, who took you in and taught you his trade?"

"But I am tired of this trade," Hasan said defensively. "I thought all goldsmiths were rich, but—"

"But, but!" she exclaimed. "My son, Bassorah is a wealthy city, for this is where the long sea meets the richest farmland east of Egypt. The traders come here in great number, and the boatsmen and camel-drivers and farmers. But you can't expect to make your fortune as a goldsmith without working for it. All day you sit idly in your shop and read books about the adventures of liars like that Sindbad of the Sea, instead of calling out to passing merchants who might pay you well for your effort. No wonder you sell nothing!"

"I'm sure this Persian is honest," Hasan argued uncertainly. "He wears a turban of pure white muslin, in the best manner of the True Believer. And he wants to adopt me as his son!"

He ignored her look of reproach and retired, but sleep was slow in coming. Gold!

Hasan woke at dawn, performed the morning ablution, and rushed to his shop without speaking to his mother. Anxiously he cast about for copper; this was a detail he'd almost forgotten. It would not be wise to use a finished utensil, because if anything were to go wrong the loss would be awkward, particularly when his mother learned of it. Ah—there was a broken platter that would have to be melted down anyway. It was copper, or at least good brass, and it should do well enough.

Before long the Persian appeared. Hasan jumped up. "Welcome, O noble Uncle! Let me kiss your venerable hands."

The Persian restrained him. "We must do this business quickly, before the neighboring smiths arrive, or everyone will know the secret. Have you heated your furnace?"

"O yes, Uncle!"

"Set up the crucible and apply your bellows."

Hasan hastened to comply, forgetting in his eagerness yesterday's promise of freedom from such labors. The fire blazed up hotly, until it seemed the crucible itself would melt.

"Where is your copper?"

"Here, Uncle!"

"Take your shears and cut it into small pieces and melt them down promptly."

Hasan was amazed at the businesslike air of the man who yesterday had waxed so sentimental. He followed the terse instructions, sweating profusely under his tunic from the unaccustomed heat and effort. The metal became a thick liquid as he wrestled mightily with the bellows.

The Persian inspected it approvingly. He removed his turban, reached inside, and brought out a

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folded wad of paper. A few ounces of yellow powder were inside. "Stand back, boy," he said, "but don't let up for a moment on the bellows."

Hasan pumped until he thought he would expire, while still trying valiently to observe every detail of the magic.

The old man held the paper above the crucible. "In the name of Jabir ibn-Hayyan, the father of alchemy, and by virtue of this catalyst he created and bequeathed to me in dire secrecy, let this base metal be converted forthwith to purest gold!" He shook in some of the bright powder.

It seemed to Hasan that the pot bubbled angrily and that an ominous glow suffused the room. This was evil magic, and the Persian had not invoked the name of Allah . . . .

"Hold!" and Hasan relaxed gratefully. He wiped his smarting eyes and peeked into the crucible.

Gold.

"Test it," said the Persian, smiling. "You will find it to be of rare quality."

Hasan quenched it and manhandled the still hot mass out of the pot and rubbed it with a file. It was genuine. He leaned against the counter for support, dazed by the reality. Gold! The magician had not been lying.

The Persian gave him no rest. "Quickly, son, hammer it into an ingot before the merchants come."

Hasan bent hastily to the task, while the Persian watched with an inscrutible expression. "Are you married?"

"No, sir!" The ingot was almost shaped.

"Very good," the old man said to himself, with another appraising glance at Hasan. "Now carry this gold to the market and sell it quickly. Don't waste time haggling over the price; as soon as you have a good offer, take the money, go home without a word to anyone, and put it away where no one will see it. We don't want the people to interrogate you about the origin of this gold."

Hasan agreed, although he regretted being denied an immediate spending spree. His mother would insist that he put most of the money back into the goldsmith business, and he would get little pleasure from it. Of course, if she saw the ingot, she might not let him sell it at all, since many fine utensils could be fashioned from it.

He picked up the ingot, which weighed several pounds, wrapped it in a fold of his tunic, and rushed to the richest business section of Bassorah.

The assembled businessmen were amazed at the size and quality of the ingot. Bidding was rapid. "A thousand dinars," a fat purple-cloaked moneychanger offered. Hasan turned his back disdainfully. "Twelve hundred," another said, barely concealing his eagerness to possess such refined gold. Hasan yawned. "Fifteen hundred," a green-pantalooned merchant said.

Hasan studied the last bidder calmly. "Allah open on you another door," he said, in the time-honored convention that indicated too low a bid. That is, Allah would have to open the door to merchandise at such a price, for Hasan certainly wouldn't.

The first moneychanger squinted, catching on to the fact that this young

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man was not entirely innocent about the value of his merchandise. "Eighteen hundred dinars—no more," he said.

"Allah open—" Hasan said, then remembered the Persian's warning. "This fine gold is a gift at such a price— but I am weary of carrying it. Take it for two thousand dinars."

In such manner he completed the richest transaction of his life.

"Look at this, Mother!" he cried as he burst into the house with the hefty purse of coin. "My father the Persian has shown me how to make gold from a broken platter, and I sold it for half a year's income, and I'm going to be rich!"

The old woman shook her head lugubriously, despite the proof displayed before her. Hasan had forgotten his resolve to hide the news from her. "No good will come of this. It is devil's money." And she blessed herself, saying "There is no majesty and there is no might, except in Allah, the Glorious, the Great!"

"I must take more metal to the shop," Hasan said, paying no attention to her words. He picked up a large metal mortar, a pot once used for crushing onions, garlic and corn cakes. Heedless of his mother's expostulations, he carried it out the door.

The Persian was still sitting in the shop, relaxing in its shade with his turban in his lap. His hair was almost as white as the headpiece. "What are you doing with that thing?" he demanded.

"I'm going to put it on the fire and turn it into gold," Hasan said.

"Have the jinn taken your wits?" the Persian exclaimed, choking. "The surest way to arouse suspicion would be to appear in the market twice in a day with mysterious ingots of perfect gold. The merchants would be certain you had stolen them, and this would cost us both our lives."

Hasan was chagrined. "I hadn't thought of that."

"If I am to teach you this craft—and there is more to it than mere sprinkling of powder—you will have to promise to practice it no more than once a year. That will easily bring enough income to maintain you."

"I agree, O my lord!" Hasan said, anxious to master the process. So long as no limit was set upon the amount converted in that annual session . . . .

He placed the crucible over the furnace and heaped more charcoal on the fire.

"Now what are you up to?"

"How am I to learn this craft if we don't go through the steps again?"

"There is no majesty and no might save in Allah!" exclaimed the Persian, laughing at the youth's audacity. "You have the singlemindedness of a thirsty camel, lad. But you hardly demonstrate the wit required for this noble craft. Do you expect to learn such an art in the middle of the street? With all the grasping shoppers and beggars looking on? Don't you know what they do to proven alchemists?"

"But—"

"If you really want to master this mystery immediately, come to my house, where there will be privacy."

"Let's go!" Hasan replied immediately, closing up his shop.

But as he followed the Persian, he

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began to reflect upon his mother's warning. Such men did have a bad reputation. How could he be certain this was not some elaborate trick to lure him into slavery, perhaps in the uncharted marshland? Handsome young artisans were valuable, and few questions were asked if their tongues were cut out. Did he really know this stranger well enough to trust himself to his house? His feet dragged, and finally he stopped in confusion.

The Persian turned to see him lagging. "Are you having foolish second thoughts *now*, my son? Here I am, trying to do you the greatest favor of the age because of the love I have in my heart for you—while you hang back, accusing me of bad intent!"

Hasan felt quite guilty, but his doubt remained. The man was leading the way out of the city, and it was hard not to suspect pork in the cookpot.

"Ah, the folly of youth!" the Persian expostulated. "Well, boy, if you're afraid to come to my house, I must go to yours. I can teach you there just as easily, so long as you provide the materials."

Hasan brightened. "You can?"

"Show me the way, son."

Hasan's mother was not delighted. "You brought the idolator *here?* I will not share the roof with him!"

"But this way he is proving his good faith. What harm could he do at my house?"

"What harm could a cobra do in your house? A sword-tusked boar? You—"

"He's standing outside our door right now."

"No! He is nothing but a ghoul, an evil influence. I will not remain while he sets foot in this house!"

"But he is teaching me to make gold out of—"

"He is making mush out of your brains. I'll stay at my cousin's house until he is gone." She was already busy setting the house in order, however, lest the unwelcome guest find anything to criticize. At length she finished her preparations and left by the back way, so as not even to see the Persian, and Hasan was free to invite the patient guest inside. Then he had to run to the market to buy food, while the Persian waited some more.

Hasan spread his best circular cloth on the floor, in the corner near the two divans, and arranged the meal. He set up a stool supporting a large brass tray, upon which were several copper dishes. Around these were round, flat cakes of bread, some cut limes, and small wooden spoons. He had hired a servant-boy for the meal, who now brought large napkins and a basin and ewer filled with water to each of them. They rinsed their mouths and washed their right hands ceremoniously as they sat cross-legged on the two divans. It would never do to eat with an unclean hand.

"In the name of Allah, the Compassionate, the Merciful," Hasan said, serving himself first in accordance with the ritual. This showed that the food he offered his guest was wholesome. He drew a dish of mutton toward him, stewed with assorted vegetables and with apricots, and removed a morsel with the aid of a piece of bread.

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The Persian did likewise. For a moment it looked as though he was about to touch the food with his left hand, and Hasan marveled at this. All True Believers knew that the left hand was unclean. It was unthinkable that the hand that cleaned the privates should ever touch the face ... yet the visitor had almost—

He was imagining things. Even in Persia, they were not that slovenly. He should abolish such unnatural suspicions.

Hasan drank some cool water from a porous earthern bottle. "Praise be to Allah," he said—but did not mention that it had been many weeks since Allah had blessed him with a repast like this.

"May your drink produce pleasure," the Persian replied, also following the ritual. But his gaze was calculating.

"Now there is the fellowship of bread and salt between us," Hasan exclaimed as they ate. "What loyal servant of Allah would violate that?"

"What, indeed," the guest replied dryly.

They finished the meal and the Persian leaned back, belched politely, but did not wash his hand again. "What did you bring for dessert?"

Hasan stammered in confusion. He had forgotten this detail.

"No trouble, my son. You just run down to the market again and fetch us something suitable, some sweetmeats." He closed his eyes comfortably, anticipating no refusal.

Hasan rose hastily and dashed off, forgetting to send the servant, and returned shortly with an armful of pastries. The Persian eyed the monstrous amount the young man had brought home in his enthusiasm and shook his head with mock perplexity. "O my son—the likes of you delight the likes of me. Now in all Bassorah could I have found a more appropriate subject for my purposes!" He hardly bothered to conceal the sneer, but Hasan in his naivete flushed with pleasure.

After they had eaten their fill and washed hands and face again, the Persian stretched lazily and uttered the magic words. "O Hasan, fetch the gear."

Hasan shot out of the house like a colt let out to fresh green pasture in the spring. He ran to his shop and carried all the apparatus he could sustain back to the house, once more panting and sweating with the exertion he hoped to be relieved of so soon.

The Persian withdrew from his turban a package of some weight. "My son, this wrapping contains three pounds of the elixir I demonstrated this morning, and each ounce of it will transform a pound of copper into the finest gold. When this is gone, I will make up another batch for you."

Hasan trembled as he took the package and stared at the glittering yellow powder. "What do you call this?" he inquired. "How is it made?"

The Persian laughed far more than the innocent questions deserved. "Must you know everything at once, boy? There will be time for that later. The manufacture of this elixir is quite complicated; for now you should be satisfied to keep quiet and master its proper application."

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Hasan did not notice the increasingly overbearing tone or the poor breeding the laughter betrayed. Gold dazzled his mind's eye. He found a brass platter and cut it up and threw the pieces into the melting pot. He blew up the fire until the metal melted, then shook in a little powder and stirred the mixture vigorously. He was so intent on what he was doing that he never thought to call upon Allah for blessing.

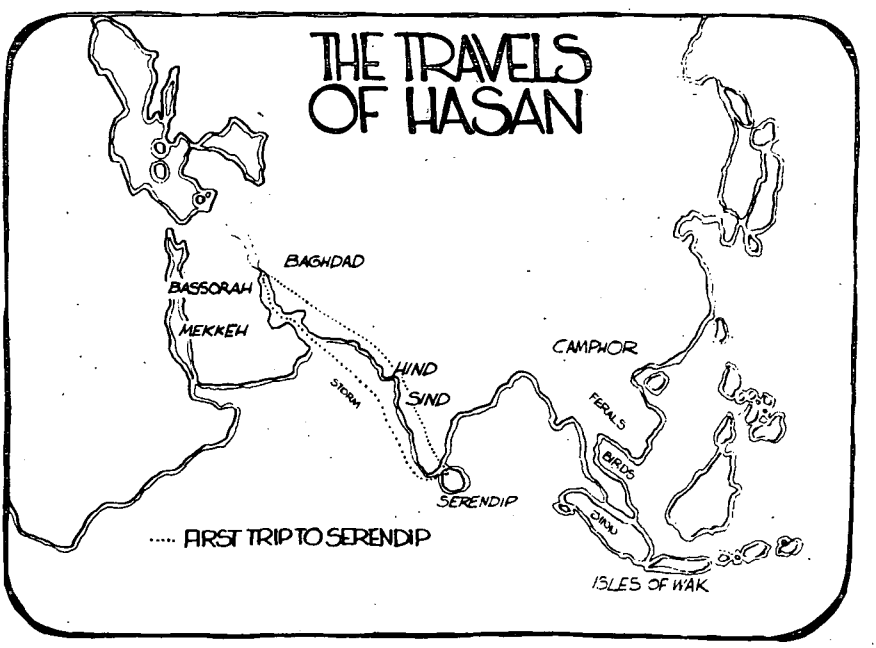
Nevertheless, the molten potful steamed up, shimmered, and took on the golden hue. "It worked!" Hasan shouted. "I did it! I made gold!"

He removed his crucible from the heat and fumbled with the tongs as the golden lump cooled. He did not see the Persian break open one of the surplus pastries, shake in a little powder of a different complexion, and seal it up again. He did not overhear the exuberant chuckle.

"You have done very well, my son," the Persian said. "You seem to have a natural talent for what I have in mind, and I am most pleased with your performance. Did I mention that I have a daughter, who is as lovely a girl as anyone has ever seen?"

Hasan pulled his eyes momentarily away from the glistening mass of gold. "Sir, I thought you were unmarried. How can you have a daughter?"

The Persian paused, but corrected himself quickly. "You are astute, my boy. True, I have no wife *now*. I had one, a very discerning and gracious and obedient woman of singular beauty, but she died five years ago and I have brought my daughter up and educated her myself. Since you are to be my adopted son, it seems appropriate that I marry her to you."



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Things began to fall into place for Hasan. A marriagable daughter; an offer of unlimited gold. The full commitment was coming to light.

"Well, I hadn't planned to—"

"I assure you, she is no less beautiful than yourself, a fitting match. Her face is like the full moon, her hair darker than the night, her cheeks rosy as—"

"Shouldn't I see her first?" Hasan asked cautiously, disturbed by the manner the Persian seemed to be reading his face.

"Her posture is like a slim bamboo among plants; her eyes are as large and dark as those of a delicate young deer."

"Yes, but—"

"Her two breasts are like fresh round pomegranates; her buttocks are like wind-smoothed hillocks of sand ... and she is just fourteen years of age!"

"Done!" cried Hasan, carried away by this vision. After all, there was always the gold, in case the damsel fell short of the description.

"Congratulations! Let's celebrate with another sweetmeat," the Persian said, pressing the one he held on Hasan.

The young man bit into it automatically, careless of all ceremony, thinking of gold and hillocks of sand. Once more he forgot to praise Allah before taking food.

A vacant expression came over his face He reeled and collapsed, unconscious.

"O dog of an Arab!", the Persian exalted. "O carrion of the gallows! How many months have I searched for as handsome an innocent as you, yet how near you came to slipping my net. But now I have you! If an elephant smelled that bhang I fed you, he would sleep from year to year."

Nevertheless he took the precaution of binding Hasan hand and foot, gagging him, and packing him into a great chest, which he locked. Then he gathered together all the money from the sale of the first ingot of gold, and everything else of value in the house including the second ingot, and packed it all into another chest. Before long he had summoned a porter from the market and assigned him the second trunk, instructing him not to drop it. He dallied only long enough to scribble a message on the wall, and departed in haste.

A rented ship, provisioned and crewed, was waiting for him in a special harbor outside the city, in the direction he had attempted to lead Hasan earlier. He paid off the porter, loaded the merchandise on board, and set sail immediately with a fair wind.

What a welcome awaited Hasan's mother when she came home that evening! The door was open, the rooms ransacked, and her cherished son was gone. All that remained were cryptic words printed crudely on one wall, near a half-eaten bit of sweetbread:

The spirit came and wakened one from bed;
But when he woke, he found the spirit fled!

Chapter Two

Vinegar and acrid powder choked Hasan, and he came to his senses

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coughing and sneezing violently. The world seemed to be swaying and tilting in crazy combinations, now one way and now another, so that he could hardly orient himself. He felt sick.

A black ifrit stood before him. "So the Arab pig opens his eyes!" a harsh voice said near his ear. Hasan recognized the voice of the Persian, despite the change in tone. Was he a demon?

His eyes cleared slowly, and he saw that what he faced was not an infernal creature, but a grinning Negro slave, a eunuch. Beyond the slave was a short wooden deck, and beyond that—

He was aboard a ship! He could see the lapping waves, the distant shoreline. No wonder he had reeled to the steady rocking of the floor. He was sitting on one of the great chests his mother had saved, and beside him sat the Persian. How had such a thing come about?

"There is no majesty and there is no might, except in Allah, the Glorious, the Great!" he swore. "We belong to Allah, and to Him we shall return."

"Don't prate your ridiculous faith aboard this ship!" the Persian snapped. "You are in my power now, you incredible simpleton."

Hasan began to understand. He had eaten a pastry this man had handed him—and suddenly found himself among strangers and far from home. He had been drugged! But why?

"O my father," he said quietly, "what have you done? Didn't we eat bread and salt together, so that neither could ever betray the other?"

The Persian stared at him. "Do you expect me to be bound by your superstitions? Your life means nothing to me, and your friendship less. I have slain nine hundred and ninety-nine whelps like you, and you shall surely be the thousandth." His expression was so serious that Hasan could not doubt that he meant what he said. All of it had been a trick after all, to lure him into this situation. His mother's warning had been valid, and his own early suspicions justified.

He shifted his hands and found them tied behind him. His feet were free, but he was helpless. Yet obviously they weren't going to kill him right away; the ship must have a destination, and a far one, or it would not have been employed at all. Was he to be a sacrifice? He had heard of such things, at least in the far reaches of the world where the jinn-folk lived. He should be safe for a few days, at least.

Hasan was frightened, but not nearly as much as he thought he ought to be. Perhaps the drug the Persian had given him still affected his senses. Still, he had always longed for adventure and never had the means to undertake it. Now it had come upon him unawares, and though the shaft of fate was painful, it was not wholly repulsive. The Persian might be bluffing, testing him, trying out his mettle; if not there were a thousand things that might happen before the sentence was carried out. Well, perhaps a hundred, or at least ten ...

"Who are you?" he asked the Persian. "What do you want with me?"

The man studied him as if annoyed that there had been no screaming or

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begging. "I am Bahram the Guebre, the foremost magician of Persia. I will use you to obtain the essential ingredient for my elixir of gold, and you will not survive that use."

"Why don't you kill me now, Bahram?" Hasas was astonished at his own temerity; he had never imagined that he could contemplate death so calmly.

"Don't be impatient, lad; you have three months to live yet; maybe more. I would have killed you before now, if more important considerations didn't restrain this pleasure."

"Do you expect me to live three months without eating?" Hasan asked him. "How good a magician are you?"

The Persian refused to take offense at the tone. "Untie his hands and give him some water," he directed his slave.

The eunuch came forward cheerfully. He was big and wore bright red pantaloons; evidently he had once been muscular, but now was running to fat. His eyes were sleepy, but his hands, as he reached around Hasan to undo the cord, were clever and gentle. "Now tread lightly, Arab," he murmured into Hasan's ear as he worked.

Hasan stretched his arms. His wrists were chafed and stiff where the rope had bound them, but were after all serviceable. He accepted the jug the slave offered. As he drank, his eyes ran over the ship.

It appeared to be a fair-sized merchant ship, built for the open sea. There were no oars—if merchanters carried oarsmen, there would be little space for cargo—and he could see the tall center mast reaching up into the single square sail. She might be as much as forty-five feet from stem to stern—but old. Even though he was no Sindbad, he could sense the wallow and see the age of the calking in the worn deck. This tub would not be worth much in a storm.

Hasan finished his drink and returned the bottle to the eunuch. "Praise be to Allah," he said, and launched himself from the chest.

And sprawled on the deck. The slave had neatly tripped him. He was neither as sleepy nor as stupid as he looked, that eunuch.

"Tie the ingrate up again," Bahram said. "We won't give him another chance to betray our trust."

"Betray your trust!" Hasan exploded. "Why you dog, dog-fathered, grandson of a dog! How can you act other than as a dog? *Trust!*"

Bahram stood up. "By the virtue of the Heat and the Light of the Fire I worship, do not tempt me to violence, boy!"

"What temptation remains for the uncircumsised cur who foully betrays bread and salt?"

"Silence!" the Persian roared. His hand swung round to deal Hasan a blow that sent him crashing to the ceck. This time, with his hands bound, he struck face down. He felt his teeth digging into the dirty planking as he passed out.

His trial was not over. Sea water dashed in his face brought him spluttering to his senses a second time. He knew that only a moment has passed. His nose stung fearfully in the salt and he could taste the blood running over his bruised lips. His front teeth felt as though they had

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been driven back into his head; angry tears trickled down his cheeks.

The eunuch propped him up and mopped away some of the mess. "You have more to lose than a few drops of blood, Arab," he murmured, his voice so soft that Hasan knew the magician was not intended to overhear. "Appease his fancies; it won't hurt Allah, the All-knowing."

Hasan nodded, not certain whether this was a genuine condolence or another trap. Certainly he would not again insult the Persian to his face. Not while he was bound, anyway.

"Make a Fire!" Bahram said, and two young boys, white servants, appeared with a brazier. They filled it with charcoal and tinder and struck sparks into it, and soon a hot flame crept up through the chunks. Hasan wondered what would happen if such a stove were to be overturned on the deck. No—the wood had just been soaked down, and would not ignite.

"What is the purpose of that?" Hasan inquired, discovering that his fall had not affected his power of speech, despite the discomfort of teeth and nose.

"This is the Fire, my Lady of Light and Sparkles! She is the goddess I worship, not your foul bread-and-salt Allah. See how bright She is! How fair!" Indeed, as the magician looked into the flame his expression was rapt, and he stood tall and bold.

Hasan was disgusted, but he held his peace. How could he ever have been fooled by such a creature?

Bahram turned to him, his eyes burning fanatically. "O Hasan—this is my Beloved! Worship Her as I do, and I swear to you I will give you half my wealth and marry you to my maiden daughter. Worship the Fire, and I will set you free and find some other sacrifice." He waited expectantly.

Hasan forgot his recent resolution. "Woe to you!" he cried out angrily. "You are a criminal who prays to a vanishing element instead of to the True God, the King of the Omnipotent, the Creator of Night and Day. How can you desert the God of the Prophets Moses, Jesus, and the great Mohammed? This is not worship you practice—it is nothing but calamity!"

Bahram stiffened. "O dog of the Arabs, are you refusing to worship with me?"

"I will never turn my face away from Allah!"

The man's eyes smoldered like the coals of the brazier, but he did not strike Hasan again. He faced the fire, dropped to his knees, and prostrated himself before it ritually. "O Sacred Fire, I will punish this infidel for his blasphemy!"

He stood up and spoke to the eunuch. "Cast him on the deck on his face!" The slave obeyed, muttering dolefully into Hasan's ear.

"I told you. I told you, Arab. You didn't have to renounce Allah in your heart. 'Appease his fancies,' I said, 'It won't hurt your god,' I said. But you—" Then Hasan hit the deck, more gently this time, and the remaining advice was lost.

"Strip him down," Bahram directed. Hasan felt the Eunuch's careful black hands pulling away his tunic, leaving him bare from neck to calf.

"I don't like this any better than you do," the slave muttered as he

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worked, untying and retying the bindings. "Next time, keep your mouth shut, eh?"

"Take your elephant-hide whip and beat him!" the Persian said. And the eunuch dutifully laid on with the stiff knotted thongs.

Hasan had determined to maintain silence during the beating, and refuse the magician the satisfaction of his screams, but a cry of agony tore free at the first blow. Hasan had never before experienced such pain. His entire back flamed up with the savage rasp of the rough leather. The second blow fell and he screamed again; the very skin seemed to be wrenched from his body. A third blow, this time across the posteriors—and now he felt the blood running down from the cuts of the lash.

A fourth blow: "Allah!" he screamed. "Protect me!" But there was no protection. A fifth blow; he wrenched up his head and implored the Almighty in the name of Mohammed, the Chosen Prophet—but there was no succor.

A sixth blow. He thought he would faint with the pain, the terrible destruction of his body ... but he could not faint. Now the tears rolled down his face like the dripping sea water, and in the humiliation and agony he said what he could no longer avoid saying.

"In the name of the Fire: mercy!"

The seventh blow did not fall.

"Raise him up," the Persian said gently. "We shall be eating now."

The slave clothed him again and set him on the chest, and the servant-boys brought wine and boiled rice and set them before him. But Hasan was ashamed of himself—though he had never renounced Allah in spirit—and did penance by fasting. He refused to eat the lowly rice or sip the forbidden beverage.

"You'll eat when you get hungry, boy," Bahram said wisely. "If not today, tomorrow." Hasan knew he was right.

Hasan was kept tied at all times except for meals. He never had a chance to look around the ship, or to talk with the crewmen, though he saw half a dozen of them in the course of their normal duties. It was evident that they feared and disliked the magician, but would not interfere. Undoubtedly they had been hired for such voyages before, or were under regular contract with Bahram, and had learned to ignore the cries and appeals of hapless captives.

Each day the ship coursed south along the Persian shore, farther away from Bassorah and civilization. Each night it hove to in some natural harbor for safety from the demons of night and water. Some days the winds were adverse, and the ship was unable to make significant progress; Hasan blessed Allah for such weather. On other days the winds were fair, and Hasan watched the shore parade by, its rocks and beaches and inlets ever less familiar, in growing despair.

The days became weeks, the weeks months, or so it seemed to one who had no accurate way to reckon time. Hasan also bemoaned the fact that he was unable to perform the required ablutions and prayers. First, the Persian would have beaten him again if he had attempted any obvious

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homage to Allah, and he did not feel strong enough to undergo such pain the prescribed five times each day. Second, he could be certain of neither the precise time of day nor the direction of the Holy City, which he had to face during prayer. Third, he had no water with which to cleanse himself before prayer. Fourth, he was constantly bound, and could not accomplish the motions and gestures of the normal ritual. He felt unclean and defiled, but there was nothing he could do, and after a time he ceased to worry about it unduly. Allah was all-powerful and all-knowing; if it was His will that his servant be unable to pray properly, who was Hasan to protest?

The shoreline became mountainous, then leveled off into a steady jungle. Great rivers carried their rich sediment into the sea. At times the shore on the opposite side had been visible, but now, crane his head around as he might, Hasan could see nothing but a blue expanse of sea. He heard the crewmen talking, and knew that the ship was approaching the magical land of Hind. This must be their destination, and the number of his days was dwindling.

"Praise be to Allah," he said to himself fervently. "May he send a wind to dash this vessel away from that shore!"

This time it seemed that his informal prayer was to be answered. In the afternoon a sudden blackness came upon the sky, and the sea grew dark and wild. A strong wind sprang up so quickly that it caught the sail before the crewmen could furl it and blasted the ship away precipitously from land. She rocked and pitched sickeningly and her old timbers creaked; Hasan himself, who had much more to gain than to lose, began to fear for his life. A sailor screamed as the boat yawed and pitched him into the whipping sea; before his friends could help him he was gone. They brought the sail down, somehow, but it was already torn. It would be many days before they could make it serviceable again.

Still the wind rose, screaming through the ancient rigging and smashing sheets of water over the tired deck. Now the rain was marching over the ocean, a nebulous army, and the dark of the storm was closing down upon them. Men ran wildly and uselessly about as planking tore loose from the deck and upended into the liquid melee. There was little they could do now except hold on and pray.

Hasan, still bound, was helpless—but he seemed to be in no more trouble than the others. They all were prisoners for the time being.

Suddenly the stout captain worked his way to the space where Hasan lay and the dampened Persian clung with his two boys and the eunuch. "By Allah!" the captain swore, "this is all because of that fair youth you are mistreating. Let him go, and the wrath of God will abate."

"Mind your own business!" Bahram screamed at him. "This youth is mine, and I will not tolerate any interference. Go secure the ship; that's the only way you can save us all."

The captain made as if to release Hasan himself, but the eunuch, at a sign from Bahram, interposed. The captain withdrew, grumbling.

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For a moment the sea calmed. Then there was a scream of fear. Hasan looked out over the water where a crewman pointed and beheld a monstrous and terrifying shape. It was an enormous funnel, tiny where it touched the water, but whirling up into a black cloud as big as the sky. High-pitched thunder came from it, a sustained scream like that of a savage sandstorm.

"A marid!" the captain exclaimed, naming the most powerful of the tribes of the jinn. "Now we are lost indeed!"

Every person watched, fascinated, as that awful creature waltzed across the ocean, now leaning toward the ship, now artfully retreating. In a moment it would tire of its game and descend upon the ship and tear it apart and smash the fragments, wood, cloth and bone, into the hungry wake.

"Kill the magician!" the captain cried. "He is responsible for this. Appease that marid!"

The crewmen rushed upon Bahram in a body. The Persian drove them back temporarily with threats and demoniac gestures, for they were afraid of him still, and the big eunuch got between them again. Three men bore him down; a knife flashed, the ship rocked, and suddenly the slave was crawling across the deck, bleeding from a gut wound. Once more the ship pitched, and he rolled over the edge of the deck and disappeared.

The two young servants screamed and tried to escape. They too were caught and sacrificed. Only the Persian himself remained, as the crewmen gathered to bring down the last of the supernatural's grievances. As they delayed, in a larger swell of the sea that forced them all to cling frantically to the tenuous woodwork, Bahram somehow made his way to Hasan and cut his ties.

"It was a mistake, my son," he shouted through the gale. "I do not mean to sacrifice you. Come, I will dress you in fine raiment and take you back to your native land. We are friends!"

The marid lifted its tail into itself and whirled back into the clouds. It had spared the ship. The wind eased and the waves subsided. "You see!" Bahram harangued the crewmen. "There is no quarrel between me and Allah; none between me and this fair lad. The marid was only passing by, and you chose to interpret this as divine intent. You are attacking us for nothing!" And he put his arm around Hasan and kissed him on the cheek.

The captain hesitated. "Is this true, O man of Bassorah?"

Hasan was too confused by the storm and the abrupt change in his situation to answer immediately. "Of course it's true!" shouted the Persian, instilling belief by the power of his voice. "The marid has gone and Allah has made the water quiet. What other evidence do you need?"

Still the captain hesitated, fingering his knife. He was not, in the clutch, a timid man, and he did not change his mind easily. "I want an answer of the boy, the one you have tied and beaten."

Hasan gathered his wits. Certainly he could never trust the Persian again, and would be foolish to throw away this chance to eliminate him

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permanently. One word would do it—

He opened his mouth, but Bahram spoke first, directly and compellingly. "O my son, in the name of Allah, forgive me for the evil I have done you and do not seek revenge. Let me prove to you how sure a friend I can be. I repent my cruelty to you, and wish only to make amends."

Hasan had thought he hated this man, but there was something so touching and persuasive about the magician's present appeal that he knew he could not go through with it.

"You see," Bahram shouted immediately to the crew, "*he* does not wish my end. Forget the matter and go about your business!" And the captain, an honest but uncertain man, in the face of Hasan's silence, obeyed.

Things were considerably more pleasant after that. Hasan was provided with good clothing and permitted to perform his ablutions in the prescribed manner. Several members of the crew joined him every day. Bahram said no more about fire worship, though he did not honor Allah either. Everyone was friendly now and Hasan learned many things about the structure and handling of a ship.

Several days were required to repair the sail and the other damaged sections of the ship. Hasan was anxious to commence the journey home, but somehow, in those idle days, he found himself agreeing to Bahram's proposal that they proceed to the original destination.

"O my son, surely you don't believe that I ever intended you evil? I was only testing you, in order to be certain that you were indeed a devout servant of Allah and a fit match for my lovely daughter. Only in the heat of the fire can the surest sword be tempered. And you have vindicated yourself gloriously! How can you give up the marvelous adventures that await you, now that you have proven your right to them? Do you want them to laugh in Bassorah and say "Hasan journeyed three months, but changed his mind in sight of adventure'?"

"What adventure is this?" Hasan asked cautiously.

"O my son, we are bound for the Mountain of Clouds, the most magnificent mountain in the world, upon whose summit are the ingredients for the elixir that makes gold. You want to make more elixir, don't you?"

"Yes, but—"

"I knew you would agree. I knew you had the heart of an adventurer. O, it is a place of rare enchantment and beauty, the like of which few men are privileged to see. You will find it fascinating, this mountain in Serendip."

Hasan looked up from the restless waves. "Serendip? You mean the island Sindbad visited?"

"Who?"

"Sindbad the Seaman. He's famous in Bassorah. He—"

Bahram smiled indulgently. "Believe me, Hasan, his name will never be known beyond your city. A common seaman!"

Thus Hasan discovered one day that he had agreed to go on, although he remained leery of the Persian's friendly words. The ship set sail once

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more for the fabled land Hasan had read about, that nothing now could keep him from: Serendip. Perhaps, on his return, he would pay a call on the seaman ...

More weeks passed. They left behind the marvelous country of Hind, where monstrous elephants were said to roam wild, and bore south along a mountainous coast. Finally the land curved again, and they faced the rising sun; then at last the ship bore north. It was as though they had circled the world and were ascending its far side. Then they cut east again, directly out to sea—and new land came into view. Serendip at last!

The green surf broke against shallow islands under the water and sent white breakers foaming onto the beach. Familiar palm trees came up to the shore here and there, but the rest of the scenery was strange. The sands were not white, but colored—pebbles of white and yellow and sky-blue and black and every other hue, intermixed with unusual rocks. And in the shallow waters were remarkable fishes, no less colorful than the stones, and even stranger marine formations. Bahram had been right: this was a land of adventure!

"O my son," the Persian said, "make ready, for this is the place we desire. We must go ashore."

Hasan was delighted at the news. He wanted nothing better than to run along that bright beach and to explore the magic landscape beyond. This was a far cry from Bassorah! He could see already that the earth was not brown, but red, as though the blood of a god had colored it. He no longer regretted his decision to continue the voyage.

But he had uneasy second thoughts when he observed Bahram making arrangements with the captain, who was to remain behind with the ship and safeguard the goods aboard. He had thought, somehow, that the entire party was coming along, and did not relish the solitary company of the magician. Yet of course the ship could not be deserted ... and the land excursion should not take long.

He made up a pack of supplies, and was ready, physically and emotionally, when the time came to jump into the shallow waves and wade ashore.

The adventure had begun!

Chapter Three

They left the beach and marched inland, east, until the ship and the sea itself were out of sight. After a few miles Bahram called a halt, set down his pack, and took out a kind of kettle-drum fashioned of copper and a silken strap. Hasan marveled at the man's possession of such a useless object, here in the wilderness, but said nothing. The Persian was full of surprises.

Bahram set up his drum and began beating it regularly with the strap, so that it made a rhythmical music. Hasan stared. Had the man come this far merely to hear himself play? Allah did not approve of music—but this was ridiculous! Or was the man contemplating some kind of sinister spell, of which this was but the prelude? Hasan once more regretted his actions; he should never have come ashore, away from the friendly

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captain and crew. He was without protection now.

"Something bothering you, my son?" Bahram inquired.

"I—"

The beat never faltered. "By the truth of the Fire and the Light," Bahram said, "you have nothing to fear from me. If I hadn't needed you to accomplish this exploit, I would never have brought you ashore. I tell you that the adventure we have had is as nothing compared to what lies ahead. But if you would rather give up and return...."

"No sir," Hasan said quickly, irked at his own timidity. He was free, wasn't he? If the Persian intended foul dealings, Hasan could always outrun him, couldn't he?

The monotonous beat continued for half an hour. A cloud of dust appeared across the plain. Was it an attack?

"Don't alarm so easily, boy," Bahram said, amused. "Rejoice—for that cloud is what we have been waiting for."

Hasan, only moderately reassured, watched as the dust swelled and advanced, coming directly toward them. After a while he was able to make out the shapes of three dromedaries, sleek and riderless, and he laughed to think of his fears about the jinn.

The animals came right up to the magician, who put away the drum and caught hold of the leading one. "Hang our supplies on this beast," he grunted. "We'll ride the other two."

This was unexpected. Hasan had assumed that their destination was within walking distance of the ship. The use of these camels meant a much longer trip. But he lacked the courage to protest now; he mounted, and soon they were riding in style across the countryside.

As they moved inland the palms became scattered and in time disappeared entirely. The plain dried out, although it was hardly hot by the standards of Arabia. The camels picked up speed as the ground increased in firmness; but as the hours passed Hasan grew bored. His attention expanded to embrace the landscape, and he began to realize what exotic marvels he had hitherto shut out in his concern for his own affairs.

There were clumps of trees, like little islands or oases, scattered throughout the plain, and occasional boulders hundreds of feet high, and many strange plants and bushes between them. Hasan had never seen such masses of sheer stone, for there was nothing of the kind in all Bassorah or the lands about it. Meandering ditches contained stagnant water, which in turn contained fat and lazy crocodiles three times the length of a man, which at least he could recognize. A number of rats scuttled out of the way, and once he saw a python, longer than a crocodile, which quickly disappeared in the brush. Undoubtedly much more animal life existed, but it kept out of sight.

They were still on the plain as the sun sank. Hasan was afraid to inquire how much farther they were to journey, for he might not like the answer. Bahram rode stolidly ahead, making no conversation; he might have been asleep, from his appearance, but when Hasan guided his mount to one side the magician

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quickly turned his head to cover him.

They halted beside a great mangrove tree growing near a muddy river. Branches spread out in every direction, and new shoots, or perhaps new trees, sprouted from the main body to make a wonderland forest by itself. They ate from the supplies the third camel carried and spread out blankets amidst the tangled jungle of roots for the night. Hasan performed his evening prayers, facing toward the setting sun, while Bahram gazed on contemptuously.

Hasan lay on his back and stared at the sky. The land was dark, but the sky was deep blue, merging into quiet flame shot with brilliant streamers of gold. A lone hawk seemed to hang motionless far above, and the piping of the frogs grew loud. The sky flushed slowly red, clouds became dark, and finally the day was gone.

The scene and sounds were not unlike those of the land around Bassorah. He found them novel because he had never before slept in the wilderness, so close to it all.

Hasan did not drift quietly to sleep. He rolled about in his blanket as swarms of mosquitoes attacked, and slapped at the pricks of biting crawlers. He still did not entirely trust Bahram, and peered through the darkness to see whether the wrapped shape of the magician had moved. Hard roots appeared under his body where none had seemed to be when he lay down, and he fidgeted constantly in a fruitless effort to find a really comfortable bed.

The raucous screeching of birds woke him at daybreak. A flock of peafowl were scratching nearby—beautiful birds with elaborately colorful tails, but the ugliest voices imaginable. (Hasan did not know the name of the creatures of Serendip at this point, but later he was to become so thoroughly familiar with them that it seemed he had never been in ignorance.) A closer motion caught his eye, and he froze in terror as he recognized a deadly cobra sliding between him and the Persian. But the snake paid him no particular attention; it was neither bold nor timid, and after a while Hasan saw that it did not possess a hood. It was merely a snake resembling the cobra, and was probably as harmless as such creatures cared to get. It disappeared into an especially thick tangle of roots, somewhat to his relief. In a moment he heard the dying screech of a small rat, and understood the business of the snake.

Hasan stretched—and discovered something hanging from his arm. It was a leech—a legless thing an inch long, fastened to his flesh by means of a large sucker. He yanked it off instinctively—and the creature, already partly gorged on his blood, left its teeth in his body. The bite itself had been painless, but now there was an angry, smarting wound. He was nauseated.

After the morning ablution—Hasan disliked using the slimy water of the river, but there was nothing else—they ate and remounted the camels. Another long day's journey commenced.

This continued for several days. The forests gradually became thicker and richer and animal life increased. Hasan actually saw elephants

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browsing in the distance, and nearer at hand were hares and pig-like creatures. There were many insects, both flying and crawling; they had to detour at one point around a marching column of warrior ants, complete with sentinals and scouts, and Hasan was stung horrendously by a hornet once. The pain and swelling were terrible; he was sure that anyone who blundered into a colony of such insects would be lucky to escape with his life.

By day they had to struggle through the thickening growths and entangling vines of the forest, scratched and sweltering. Thorn bushes ran their cables from the branches of larger trees and stretched across the animal trails; several times it was necessary to backtrack, yielding to the impregnable brambles.

In the evenings swarms of flying insects appeared, followed by crows and rarer birds, and bats of all sizes filled the air. At night the crawling insects took over, horrible in the flickering firelight. Some were actually harmless, like the six-inch millipede Bahram picked up carelessly and tossed away; but others were deadly, like the foot-long, dark-purple scorpion that, figuratively, picked up the Persian and tossed *him* away. Hasan learned very quickly which creatures to fear, and when to choke back laughter, by observing Bahram's reactions.

Morning again, and Hasan was amazed at the profusion of spider webs sparkling in the dew. They covered every tree and bush and were strung from rock to rock and across the pathways.

This was a strange kingdom, but its appeal gained on Hasan as he adapted to its riguers. Never had he seen such proliferation of plant-life, so many unusual animals. Hoards of chattering monkeys swung through the trees and paced the travelers for hours at a time. Hasan threw a stone at one, and after that was constantly pelted with fruit. The monkeys swung closer and closer, daring him to make another hostile move, but he had learned his lesson.

Seven days passed, and in all that time the one animal he discovered conspicuously missing was the camel. Could the three trained beasts they rode be the only ones of their type on the island? Were they, the most ordinary living things he had encountered here, apart from the palms and mosquitoes, actually of magical derivation? If the commonplace were magical and the extraordinary natural, what might he anticipate at the end of this journey?

During the seventh day they encountered the mountains. Progress slowed, as the animals toiled up gradual but wearying slopes, or were led through rough terrain. The vegetation became jungle-thick, and many more birds, animals and insects appeared. The leeches, here in the hills, were twice the size of the few he had met on the plain, and infested the foliage; he was glad he was able to ride most of the time. The mountains were beautiful, and frequently they were refreshed with rain.

As they passed through a long gorge, Hasan looked up to spy the first evidence of man in this strange land: high on the tallest mountain to

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the east was a beautiful green dome, and beside it an emerald structure flashing in the sun. "O Uncle," he exclaimed, "what is that on the mountain?"

"A palace," Bahram said, but he did not sound pleased.

"Are we going to spend the night there? Is that our destination?" Hasan longed for the comforts of civilization.

Bahram grew angry, for no reason Hasan could fathom. "Don't be foolish, boy. Don't even mention that foul place to me, understand? It is the abode of jinn, ghouls and devils. An enemy of mine lurks there."

"An enemy? What did he do to you?"

"I said I didn't want to talk about it!" Bahram shouted, red with rage. And talk he did not; they rode for the rest of the day in silence.

Hasan was sorry to leave the palace behind. Even from this distance it was the most beautiful structure he had ever seen, scintillating like a jewel set in the mountain, and its aura of enchantment fascinated him. Could ghouls and devils really create such loveliness? Once this mission had been accomplished, he intended to visit that palace, regardless....

They fared on through hills, forests and fields of increasing splendor. The weather changed abruptly; massive clouds loomed above, spewing lightning and thunder and bringing a deluge upon their heads. This was a new and frightening phenomenon to Hasan. Rains were rare in Arabia, and more seemed to fall here in a single hour than in a year at home. Though it did not last long, its wasteful force was shocking. Hasan and Bahram could not talk at all, even by shouting, in the torrential wash of liquid. Flash floods filled the gullies and valleys; trees were undermined by the seething currents, and some were uprooted.

Suddenly the heavens brightened and the sun came out as though it had never departed, warm and friendly, and the steaming jungle smiled as though it had enjoyed its purge.

The mosquitoes thinned and vanished as elevation increased, but the leeches were worse. Animals were everywhere—deer, monkeys, bear, anteaters, and even prickly porcupines inhabited the massed trees. By day and night, Hasan could hear the sounds of the struggle in the wilderness, as the ceaseless competition for existence drew startlingly near. Beautiful mats of flowers covered the fields, oblivious to that struggle, and orchids bloomed wherever the sun pierced the forest foliage.

The trail curved until they faced directly west, and finally north again. Hasan knew they were near the end of the long trek. He became uneasy.

Bahram pulled up at the crest of a low hill. "O Hasan, what do you see now?"

Hasan stared ahead. "I see a monstrous wall of cloud from east to west."

"That is neither cloud nor mist," Bahram said, "but one vast mountain that splits the clouds and reaches above them. There will be sunshine on the top while there is a raging storm below. And that is what we came for."

"A mountain?" Now he

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remembered: the Mountain of Clouds.

"A mountain. What I require is on its summit, and I cannot complete my task without your help."

Hasan's alarm flared up. In just what manner did the magician intend to use him? "By the right of what you worship, tell me what you have in mind!" His eye was on the surrounding jungle. He would not risk that leech-infested wilderness on foot unless he had to; but if the Persian—

Bahram looked at him as though reading his thought. "My son," he said with deceptive gentleness, "you know that it is through the practice of alchemy that I am able to transform copper into gold. The manufacture of the essential powder requires many exotic ingredients; but the rarest of them all is derived from a herb that is found only at the top of that mountain, and nowhere else in all the world. I propose to send you up there to fetch it for me; and when we have it, I will show you the secret of this craft which you are so interested in learning. Surely you understand this?"

"O, of course, Uncle," Hasan agreed, not certain what it was he was supposed to understand, but compelled by the hypnotic eye and tone of the older man. He was afraid; he despaired of ever returning home to Bassorah, yet he could not discover any pretext to beg off this project now. Everything was so reasonable when the magician spoke....

They moved nearer to the foot of the mountain, which was farther away than Hasan had supposed, and larger. He could hear the booming of a swollen river cascading a few hundred or a few thousand feet to the side, and rolling thunder echoed from cliff to cliff. Sheer sheets of rock, impossible to climb, fronted the mountain. Hasan looked at these and became faint. He was not an athlete, and would surely die if he were to attempt so precipitous an ascent.

Bahram observed his fright and came over to reassure him. "O my son, I can understand your concern about this matter, but I assure you that everything will work out exactly as I planned." He kissed the young man's cheek. "Bear me no ill will for the manner in which we began this voyage, for I will make up for that by guarding you carefully on your trip up the mountain. You will not have to risk your life in an impossible climb; I have a special method to get you safely to the top. Once you are there, follow my instructions and do not play me false, and you and I shall share appropriately in the profit."

"To hear is to obey," said Hasan, hardly reassured.

Bahram opened a bag and removed a small handmill and some wheat. He ground the grain and kneaded three round cakes from the flour; then he made a fire and baked the hard bread. He sprinkled the cakes with some strong-smelling herbs, so that their odor was not at all appetizing. Hasan watched with worried curiosity. Who was supposed to eat this mess?

The camels had drifted off. The Persian summoned them with his drum and took hold of the one Hasan had ridden. He drew his knife and slit the animal's throat.

Hasan had seen animals slaughtered before, of course, but

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this was unexpected. His camel had been in good health, they were not in need of the meat, and Bahram had not pointed its head toward Mekkah while it bled to death, in the manner prescribed for anything killed for food.

He watched, disgruntled, as the magician followed up the pointless slaughter by slicing open the animal's stomach and disemboweling it. He severed the head, legs and tail and scraped the inside clean until hardly more than an empty shell remained.

"Now attend," he said to Hasan, wiping the blood off his hands. "I want you to lie down inside this skin, and I will sew it up again so that it looks like an entire carcass. Then I'll withdraw a certain distance, leaving you here, and after a while the roc will come and carry you to the top of the mountain, thinking this to be its meal. Take this knife with you, and when you feel the bird land, slit open the skin and come out. The bird will take fright, for it is very shy in spite of its size, and will fly away. Then walk to the edge of the cliff and call to me, and I will give you further instructions."

Hasan had misgivings and a thousand questions about this procedure. There seemed to be many important things unexplained. For instance—

"You want to make the elixir, don't you, boy?"

"Yes, but—"

"You don't want to climb that cliff yourself, do you, boy?"

"No, but—"

"You're not afraid of a little blood, are you?"

"Of course not!" But he was sick as he looked at the gutted camel.

"Can you suggest any better way to get there?"

Hasan was silent. The air-route alarmed him for many reasons, but the towering mountain-face was worse. How had he gotten himself committed to this? Why was the magician able to manage him so easily?

Bahram's piercing eye was upon him. He tried once more to protest, but his mind was a whirl of voiceless doubt. He gritted his teeth and climbed into the camel.

The carcass was still warm, the blood still sticky. Hasan controlled his rebellious stomach with difficulty. Bahram handed him a leathern bottle full of water—"You'll be up there a few hours, gathering the herb"—and placed the three redolent cakes beside him, as though appetizers for the main portion which was himself, the entree for a feast of ghouls. "These are to attract the roc, and draw it to you from a distance." Then he brought forth an enormous needle, threaded it with a strong gut line, and sewed Hasan up.

Hasan heard the man's feet retreating and knew he was on his own at last. He clutched the knife, thankful that at least he had the ability to cut himself free if he lost his nerve. The stench of the cakes mixed with that of the seeping blood and his own profuse sweat and stale breath to form a palpable mist. Every breath festooned his lungs with new nausea.

He couldn't stand it any longer! He aimed the blade, flexed his wrist ... and relaxed again, unable to proclaim the cowardice he felt. His heart beat

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loudly in his ears; he counted the beats, seeking distraction. He grew faint from the suffocating miasma—then realized with hysteric amusement at his stupidity that all he had to do was put his lips to the sewn portion of the hide and suck fresh air in through the holes.

He did this, heedless of the cracking blood that peeled off to smear his lips, and found blessed relief. But this only freed his awareness for other problems. The temperature, instead of declining, rose steadily as the sun beat down outside and his own body added heat to the cramped cavity. He slipped and slid in the jelly formed by his sweat and the juices of the camel meat, and a kind of delirium clouded his senses. What if there were leeches outside, big ones, and a monster leech came, four, five inches long, and fastened itself upon his exposed lips? Or a great blue scorpion....

How many hours had passed? It had been midday when he entered this prison. It would be cool when night came, and it certainly hadn't cooled yet. Probably he had lain here less than an hour—but what an hour! How much more would he have to endure? Would the roc ever come? Did he really want it to? What if it picked him up, changed its mind, and dropped him?

As though this cheering thought were the signal, a powerful beating of the air began, sending a cooling draft past his face. It was too late to change his mind. The big bird was coming!

He tried to peer out through the sutures, but he could see nothing but the bloody ground. The carcass rocked with a final blast of wind. There was a thud! as of something heavy landing, and a surprisingly innocent clucking. A bird, even a big one, was still a bird.

The ground vibrated as the thing hopped toward him. There was a sudden, severe jar. It was pecking at the meat, testing it for edibility. Suppose it tried to feed right here? What if its sharp bill accidentally cut through the cord, so that the stitches unraveled and let the carcass fall open in mid air? Why had he ever allowed himself to be subjected to this?

The carcass shook and the upper wall depressed against him heavily. The bird was on top of it, crushing him! A giant thorn, a hooked spear poked through the wall inches from his face. It was a talon of horrifying size. Six inches long, an inch thick at the base ... and what he saw was only the tip of it, since the rest was outside a fair-thickness of gristle. This bird was timid?

The monstrous beat of wind began again, a hurricane of air smashing the ground. Dust swirled into his breathing-hole. The roc was taking off! The carcass jolted and tilted crazily, sliding him helplessly back and forth as it bumped over the ground. Then it was airborne, riding smoothly in the grip of the mighty claws.

Hasan contemplated the one visible nail. Was it really strong enough to bear his weight? Suddenly it seemed thin and slight.

Up and up: he felt the circling ascent. If only the position allowed him to *see!* But that would probably terrify him; he was better off as it

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was, merely deathly afraid. If the bird didn't grow forgetful and carelessly let go—!

The flight seemed interminable, yet Hasan had hardly become accustomed to it before it was over. There was a tooth-rattling bump! as the claw retracted and released its load. The carcass rolled over and over, bringing him visions of an uncontrolled drop over the precipice, before coming safely to rest. He grasped his knife and sliced the binding immediately. The roc might not be timid—but he could hardly afford to let it feed while he remained inside the morsel.

There was another blast of air and a ponderous wing-thunder as he struggled to emerge. A shadow passed over him. Was it attacking?

No. The bird was taking flight. It certainly was shy! By the time he had freed himself and was able to look around, it was gone.

He had seen no more of it than a single claw.

The air on the mountaintop was bright and heavenly cool. Hasan was caked with noxious grime, but he forgot this in a moment as he took deep breaths and looked around.

The summit was level and grassy, with a few trees down a little on the northern slope. To the south, the direction from which he had come, the cliffs dropped off alarmingly; he could see the sky come down to the mountain's edge and go below. The view was astonishing, particularly to one who had spent his life in lowlands: a vasty panorama of forested mountains extending most of the way around him, diminishing into plains with irregular patches of grassland and jungle, and finally the sea, a bright blue band on the horizon.

He had thought the day was cloudy (though the heat of the sun upon the carcass could not have been his imagination), but up here it plainly was not. The clouds existed beauteously, but were only fluffs decorating the larger view.

"Glory be to Allah, the Merciful, the Mighty!" he exclaimed, absorbed in a magnificence that was fit for nothing less than worship.

Belatedly he remembered his purpose here. He walked to the edge, looked down upon the forest-carpeted folds and tucks of the earth far, far below his feet and reeled back, horrified at the immense height. Now indeed he was thankful he hadn't witnessed this journey to the peak!

He got down on hands and knees and advanced again, finally spreading himself out flat and crawling the last few feet. He poked his head over, clutching at the dirt with tense fingers, and looked down dizzily.

If he had not stood in awe of the power of Allah before, this spectacle would have made him a convert.

"Bahram!" he called, afraid that he might by the effort of shouting blow himself off the cliff, so tenuous did his contact with the ground seem. "Baah-raam!"

A few seconds later there was an answering call, and he located the Persian, a tiny figure dancing about and waving his turban excitedly in the air.

"What now?" Hasan yelled.

"Move over to your left a hundred paces and tell me what you see,"

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Bahram called back, pointing ineffectually.

Hasan backed off until he felt safe enough to stand, counted off his paces, and looked around. He saw grass, bushes, flowers, and a number of disinteresting sticks of weathered wood. There was also a rounded white object the size of a bowl. He picked it up, turned it over ... and found himself looking into the square eye-sockets of a human skull.

He dropped it immediately, then chided himself for his foolishness. The man had long been dead; the skull was bleached and clean. It was sad that he had not been properly buried, but perhaps he had been an infidel. He looked more carefully and saw the other bones of the body spread about.

Did the rocs prey on men after all? They might, if the man were already dead. In any event, the ants and other insects would pick the skeleton clean soon enough. Since he saw no sign of broken or crushed bones, that had probably been the case here.

But why had the man—he assumed it was a man, since it would hardly be polite to look upon the naked bones of a woman—why had this man died up here in the first place?

Something uncomfortable was gnawing at his mind. A man had come here, perhaps by the same route he had employed himself. That man had died. What could have killed him? Hasan had seen nothing deadly here, and he was armed with the knife. What had he missed?

He put the unpleasant train of thought from his mind. It had been an accident, assuredly. He crawled back to the edge of the mountain and put his head over. "All I see are bones and sticks of wood," he called to the Persian.

"Good," Bahram replied. "That is the herb we seek. The wood. Gather it into six bundles, tie them with the thong I used to bind you into the camel, and throw them down to me."

"Wouldn't it be easier to bring the wood with me when I come down myself?"

Bahram grew angry. "Do as I say, boy, and don't ask foolish questions!"

Hasan's doubt continued, but he shook it off and lost himself in action. As he picked up the pieces of wood he encountered several more skeletons: some comparatively new, like the first, and some so old they were rotting away. His sense of foreboding grew. One dead man might represent an accident ... but six, eight? How had they come here, and what macabre fate had stalked them all?

He pulled the cord loose and cut it into suitable lengths to bind the bundles of wood. It was strange—the wood looked ordinary, and he could not fathom why it should be so important. But he did not question the magician's professional competence; he had seen his own copper transformed into gold. Perhaps the art lay in recognizing the magic properties of materials that appeared nondescript to the layman.

He brought the bundles to the edge. "Where do you want them?" he called. He noticed that the sun was low in the sky; he had, as foretold, been up here several hours.

"Fling them out toward me as far as you can," Bahram called back. He was not standing at the very base of the mountain, and in any event

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several of the rock faces were slanted, so that the wood was likely to be snagged unless heaved far out.

Hasan stepped back, stood up, and swung the first bundle over the edge. He immediately fell prone and crawled to the edge to observe its progress. It had been a good throw—the wood sailed far out, then dropped gracefully down. It still crashed into the lower faces, but slid across them harmlessly and came to rest in the forest at the base. The magician would have to bestir himself to fetch the wood, but at least it was accessible.

"That's good," Bahram agreed. "Try to place the others near it." Hasan obliged, and was pleased to see three of the remaining bundles land practically on top of the first, and another fall near it. The last went wide when his foot slipped, and crashed far to the side.

Dusk was falling—or rather, he saw now from the clarity of his elevation, rising; for the gullies and valleys were already dark, while the mountains and sky were light. "How do I get down?" he called, not wishing to be trapped the night with the skeletons.

Laughter came up from the shadows. "Down? Isn't it obvious?"

"Would I have to ask, if it were?" Hasan replied irritably.

"O, I have known some handsome lads, but none quite so foolish as you!" Bahram said. "Why, you jump down, boy!"

"But I would be dashed to pieces against the rocks!"

"Abide on the mountain, then, if you do not trust your god to bear you up. You're in good company!" And he laughed again, harshly, and spoke no more.

Hasan finally understood the reason for the skeletons. Bahram had boasted that he had slain a thousand youths—counting Hasan himself—and while that figure was probably exaggerated, he had certainly been responsible for a goodly number. One lad had been delivered here each year or so, just as he had been, and all had been rewarded in the same manner. Rather than perish in quick suicide, all these on the mountain had chosen to starve. Probably there were more bones, broken ones, at the foot of the mountain, representing those who had chosen the other method.

Why hadn't he questioned the Persian before undertaking the flight with the roc? Surely he should have secured his escape before stranding himself. "There is no majesty and there is no might, except in Allah!" he said fervently, and knew himself to be the fool Bahram had claimed. He had had ample evidence of the magician's nature, yet had listened to the artful words and shut his mind to the implications. He had refused to believe that a man could be inherently evil, even a Persian. He was, as had also been pointed out, in good company.

Darkness came upon the Mountain of Clouds in magnificent array, and the day was over. Hasan sat amid the bones and sobbed, certain that his day was over, too.

He was hungry in the morning. He felt better, though he knew his situation to be as desperate as before. He found himself in a bed of grass

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that he did not at first remember fashioning, and miraculously free of leeches.

He went to the stinking camel-hide and took out the bottle of water and the cakes. He no longer noticed the smell of them, and gulped them down rapidly.

Sunrise was magnificent. As he watched, a giant cone of darkness lay over the world to the west, the shadow of the mountain. As the sun rose this cone shortened, clocking the dawn like the sundial of Allah. The landscape in every direction was preternaturally clear, and Hasan felt glad to be alive, even for a little while.

He used some of his precious water to wash himself, so that he might be clean for his morning prayer. Allah's will would be accomplished, whatever a lone Believer might do—but a True Believer was more likely to have a beneficent fate mapped out that was a person of timorous faith. The moment Hasan neglected his homage to Allah, he would be confessing the insincerity of his worship, and therefore would know himself to deserve nothing.

He rose after the prayer and looked at the view again. Suddenly a glint caught his eye. It was to the northwest, a bright green flash in the darker green of the jungle and brush. The palace! The one Bahram hated, because it was the residence of enemies, of jinn and ghouls.

Surely, if the residents were antagonistic to the Persian, they were friends of Hasan! Even ghouls!

But he did not really believe that ghouls were there, for they were ugly creatures who had no appreciation of beauty. Their place was the crypt, not the palace. Surely persons of nobility dwelt therein. If only he could reach it....

He walked north, toward the trees he had seen before. If that slope were forested, he should be able to navigate it.

His hopes were short-lived. There was forest, but too much of it. It was a tropical jungle far denser than any they had encountered below. The trees were very large and were covered with the sword-sharp thorn vines that he knew from experience he could cut through only very tediously. There was a dense undergrowth of fern and bamboo, also intertwined with the horrible thorny vines. He might hack his way through that jungle with his little knife at the rate of half a mile a day. It might take ten days to reach the foot of the mountain.

Hasan had no food and very little water. There were probably fruits in the forest, but he did not know which ones were edible and which were poisonous. Bahram had gathered the berries of a certain plant, informing him that the seeds contained the most deadly poison known to man. The magician had also spoken of vines that produced the neferious bhang, the intoxicant that Hasan himself had fallen victim to at the beginning of this venture. How could he risk eating such things now?

There was animal life; he could hear it moving deep within the mass of foliage. The animals should be safe to eat—except that they were more likely to eat him first. He would have scant power to defend himself, amidst the stinging brambles.

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And what, finally, when he slept? Even at the edge he could see the monstrous leeches, some three inches long. They would suck him dry before the night was over.

No, there was no escape this way. Had there been a navigable trail, Bahram would never have gone to the trouble to fetch innocent boys from far-away Arabian cities. The one-way route of the roc was the only approach.

Hasan returned disconsolately to the cliffs and looked out again. If only there was some way down! Some—

There was the briefest glint from a projecting section of the cliff. Was it a mere jewel in the rock—or something more significant? He ran to that section, threw himself flat, and put his head over.

It was metal! There was a chain fastened to a spike embedded in the rock at the top, with little stirrups every three feet. Someone—Allah only knew how long ago, or for what purpose—must have made regular trips to this summit, using the chain. Probably the first journey had been made through the jungle, laboriously forced; or perhaps the roc had somehow been harnessed. After that, the shorter, more dramatic route up the face of the cliff was open.

But why hadn't any of the other youths Bahram snared taken this descent? Hasan had the answer immediately: only through a lucky chance, a single glance in this direction when the sun happened to be in position to reflect a glint off the chain—only this way had he located it at all or evensuspected its existence. If someone had told him it was there, it still would have taken him many hours to find it, checking every dangerous foot of the cliff, for the lay of the rock hid it from view.

He could sympathize with the lads before him who had instinctively shied away from the terrifying brink. Those youths had been like him: beautiful, probably pampered, naive. They were hardly fit to cope with this savage dilemma. The logic of Bahram's selection was becoming more plain. A more rustic youth, or one native to mountain country might have solved the problem readily.

Hasan had not been wiser or braver. He had been lucky. Or—Allah had woven a different skein for his life....

He wasted no more time. He drank the last of his water so that he would not have to carry it, performed an automatic prayer of thanks, and took hold of the chain. If it were no longer strong enough to sustain his weight, he was doomed anyway, so it was pointless to worry about that. "Praise be to Allah!" he shouted again, and put his foot into the first stirrup.

The chain held. Hasan climbed down as rapidly as he dared, stopping to rest when his arms grew fatigued. He reached the foot of the chain, which was only a fraction of the total distance down, and found a narrow ledge. Grasping the dangling chain with one hand, he explored the ledge, and came upon another spike and chain leading down.

He descended to a second ledge and then a third. He was hardly aware of time, but the sun changed position considerably as he maneuvered down interminable stages. Near the bottom of the mountain he landed on a ledge,

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looked for the following chain with bleary eyes and rock-chafed hands, and found only the broken spike that had anchored it. There was no final connection.

It was early afternoon. Suddenly the sky grew dark. A storm was coming up! Hasan searched for shelter, but there was none on this narrow ledge between vertical cliffs. He was far too tired to climb back up to a more secure level before the storm struck. He could not jump; though he was near the end, the remaining distance was suddenly appalling.

He sat down and huddled as tightly as he could against the wall, hoping that the rain would not dislodge him. After the tempest, perhaps he could sever a length of chain from above and hitch it to the lower spike. Would his knife prove strong enough to pry it loose? Meanwhile, he had to keep his position.

The rain dropped upon him. It blasted against the stone, and the howling winds slapped sheets of it about to hiss off the wall and sting his exposed face and hands unmercifully. His propped feet began to slide against an abruptly slippery surface; desperately he fumbled for a toe-hold, a finger-hold, anything to anchor him just a little more securely. After several minutes of this, in a momentary pause of the torrent, he realized that he should have clung to the chain itself. He jumped to reach it.

The wind, like a pouncing jinni, caught him the moment there was space between his body and the mountain. Too quickly for fear, he was teetering on the edge; then he was falling.

"Allah!" he cried, and tried to recite the funeral prayer, to remember the Koran; but these were hopeless tasks in such straits. He struck—

Water. Spluttering, he struggled upward. He had not been trained as a swimmer, but he did know the rudiments. He coughed and choked, but survived. The rain was pouring down again, but, as much by feel and fortune as by sight, he grabbed hold of strong vines and crawled ashore.

When the storm abated he looked about and understood the miracle that had saved him. He had fallen into a flash flood formed by the water running off the mountain; already the channel was clearing, leaving a rank empty ditch.

Hasan prostrated himself and gave due thanks to Allah; then he wended his way around the mountain toward the palace of the ghouls.

Chapter Four

Two young women, unveiled and fair as moons, sat in the vestibule of the palace, letting the refreshing breeze ruffle their jeweled tresses while they matched wits over a game of chess. Their dress, though elegant, was informal, since they were alone. While they played they chattered merrily about inconsequentials.

The younger girl, though less developed than her companion, might easily have been the inspiration for the Persian's description of his daughter. She heard something and looked up alertly.

Hasan stood at the entrance, weary, bloody and bedraggled. He

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lurched forward and staggered into the vestibule, reaching for a column to lean against.

His eyes met those of the girl. "Allah!" she exclaimed, astonished but hardly frightened.

The older girl immediately fastened her veil, but the pretty junior was more impulsive. "By Allah, here is a son of Adam!" she sang out joyfully.

Hasan stared at her, too tired to more than admire her beauty. He had been braced for the foulest of demons and had reconciled himself to begging aid from the most loathsome of enchanted creatures; but these creatures were lovely and this enchantment delightful. Embarrassed, he tried to put away his drawn knife, to brush back the mud-matted hair over his forehead.

"Why, this must be the fair youth that Bahram the Magician brought here this year!" the young girl said, appraising the ragged shape and battered countenance before her with no awareness of incongruity.

Hasan's strength evaporated in the face of this welcome. He threw himself to the floor in supplication. "O my ladies, yes, by Allah, I am that unhappy fool. I am faint and in pain, and I beg your compassion, for I cannot drag myself any farther."

"O yes!" the girl cried, jumping up. "We will help you."

"Rose! Your veil!" the other reminded her, shocked. "Don't disgrace yourself."

"Damn the veil! This poor man needs our help," Rose replied hotly. "He's already seen my face." But she paused, aware that nice girls never showed their features indiscriminately. She began to raise her veil, then brightened with a fresh idea.

She skipped over to Hasan and put her slender arm around his soggy shoulders. "Bear witness, O my sister, that I hereby adopt this man as my brother, by the covenant of Allah, and I will die if he dies and live as he lives, and his joy shall be my joy and his grief my grief, so long as I shall live!"

The older sister looked askance at this sheer impetuousity, but shrugged her shoulders in resignation. The deed was done, after all.

"Now I don't have to cover my face from him, do I?" Rose demanded.

"No, sister."

"And neither do you, because you're my sister and he's my brother and that makes him your brother too. Take off your veil."

The other girl sighed and removed her veil.

Rose still wasn't satisfied. "Well, come on, sister—aren't you going to embrace your long-lost brother? Aren't you glad to see him&"

"He's *not* my long-lost—"

"But you haven't seen him in at least a year, have you now?"

"Please," Hasan said stupidly, still kneeling on the floor. "I really didn't mean to—"

"Be quiet, brother," Rose said severely.

Reluctantly, and with extreme distress, the shapely older sister knelt and put her arms around Hasan.

"And kiss him, too," Rose directed.

She kissed him lightly on the cheek, while Hasan flushed magnificently. Rose then followed her sister's

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example, putting considerably more enthusiasm into it, and was satisfied. "But brother," she exclaimed as an afterthought, "you're in terrible condition. Come, I'll yank off those sopping rags and dress you in fitting raiment. What's your name?"

And she led him away, hardly paying attention to his reply, while her sister sat down and rolled her eyes at the chesscloth.

An hour later Hasan, garbed in a brilliant yellow silken robe that had been tailored for a king, was in the midst of a sumptuous repast. His pain and fatigue had vanished in the glow of the attentions he received from the two lovely maidens.

"Tell us the story of your life," Rose implored him. "It's been so long since we've had a live, handsome son of Adam to—"

"Rose!" her sister said, alarmed.

"—to listen to," she finished contritely.

"O merciful and radiant damsels," Hasan began formally, "my story is uninteresting. But I am anxious to know how you came to be here, in this marvellous palace in the wilderness, and why two such beautiful girls should choose to live alone like this. And what was your quarrel with Bahram the magician?"

Rose held up her hand, an impertinent but attractive pout on her face. "We asked you first!"

The older sister intervened diplomatically. "Since Bahram brought you here, it might be simplest if you explained your association with him. Then we'll know how to fill in our side of the story."

"Yes—tell us about Bahram, the dog!"

Hasan looked at the young women again, impressed by the fine contours of the one and the flashing animation of the other. This was the stuff his dreams were fashioned from, and it was hard to believe the girls were not phantasms of the jinn, sent to lead him to disaster. But he could not resist their gentle importunings, and soon launched into his story. Rose interrupted prettily with appropriate exclamations as he described his travails with the magician.

"Did you ask him about this palace?" she demanded.

"I did; but he wouldn't talk about it. He said it belonged to ghouls and devils."

Both girls jumped to their feet. "Ghouls and devils!" the exclaimed together, outraged.

"Yes." Hasan suspected that Bahram had been speaking metaphorically, but it didn't seem worthwhile to point this out.

"By Allah!" cried Rose. "I will slay him with my own hands!"

"But how can you do such a thing, when you are just a girl and he is a crafty magician?" This was a deliberately leading question.

"I'm *not* just a girl," she said. "I'm a princess." Nevertheless, she quieted.

"We are not untrained in weapons," the older sister said, "and we know how to deal with this man, magician or not."

Hasan did not like the sound of this. Bahram, at least, had taught him not to be naive. There had been so many indications of the Persian's intent, if only he had been able to read them

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properly at the time. How could he be sure that these maidens were not after all demons in disguise? If they could actually kill the magician—

"You promised to tell me your story," he reminded them. If they were of the jinn, he was already in their power. Their tale might clarify things. Certainly he could gain nothing by acting rashly without information.

"O yes, brother!" Rose said, impulsively kissing him. Suddenly his doubts seemed foolish. No demon could be that interesting! Of course, he was technically her brother, which curtailed the romantic implications somewhat ... perhaps fortunately. He had no serious complaint.

"Know, O my brother," Rose began portentiously, "that we are the daughters of a mighty king of the jinn—"

"Rose!" The older sister was indignant.

Hasan also reacted, but for a different reason.

"All *right!* I only wanted to make it sound more impressive. I mean, what's so exciting about an ordinary mortal king? They say there is jinn blood in our—"

"I'd much rather be brother to a mortal damsel," Hasan said. Under the circumstances, tact was natural.

"You would?" Rose murmured, suddenly shy. "Oh. Well, our father is the king of the mightiest kingdom in Sind. Almighty Allah blessed him with seven daughters by one wife—"

"Seven! You mean ...?"

Rose pouted again. "How can I tell our story if you keep interrupting? Of course there are seven of us. Everybody knows that."

Hasan apologized.

"Anyway, he had seven daughters, and he was very proud of us, even if he did need a son. But then he got so proud it was folly. He was so jealous and stiff-necked—"

"Rose!"

"—that he would not give any of us in marriage to any man at all. And he summoned his wazirs and said to them, 'Can you tell me of any place untrodden by the tread of men and jinn and abounding in trees and fruits and rills?' And they said, 'What wilt thou therewith, O King of the Ages?' And he said, 'I desire there to lodge my seven lovely daughters.' And they said, 'O King, the place for them is the castle near the Mountain of Clouds, which was built by an ifrit of the rebellious jinn who revolted from the covenant of our lord Solomon, on whom be peace! Since his destruction none hath dwelt there, nor man nor jinni, for it is cut off from the rest of the world and none may win to it. And the castle is girt about with trees and fruits and rills, and the water running round it is sweeter than honey and colder than snow; none who is afflicted with leprosy or illness drinketh thereof but he is healed forthright.' When our father heard this he joyed with great joy and brought us here with an escort of troops and left us with everything we need.

"When he wants to visit us he beats a kettle-drum, and all his hosts present themselves before him, and he comes here with his retinue. But when he wants us to visit him, he commands the enchanters to fetch us, so that he may enjoy our company, and afterwards he sends us

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back here. And that's it."

Hasan was amazed. "But surely he wouldn't prevent you from marrying all your lives!"

"You don't know daddy! We've been here four years, all the time hoping for a son of Adam to keep us company—and praised be He who brought you to us! So be of good cheer and keep your eyes cool and clear, because we've got you now!"

"But where are your five sisters?"

"They're out hunting in the forest, where there are wild beasts beyond number."

"I know," Hasan said, remembering the long days of travel.

"Well, why did you ask, brother?"

Hasan did not see through her teasing. "I meant, I know there are animals, because I saw them. And insects! And the most remarkable birds."

Again the two girls reacted. "Which birds are these?" the older sister inquired.

"Why the roc, of course. I told you how it—"

They laughed as though relieved. Hasan was mystified, but attributed it to the vagaries of feminine nature. What bird could be more remarkable than the roc?

The afternoon passed in a moment amidst inconsequential dialogue. Suddenly there was the blast of a horn outside.

"They're back!" Rose cried. "Come, Hasan—you have to meet our sisters. *Your* sisters." She hauled him after her as she dashed with unladylike haste out of the palace.

Five heavily veiled warrior maidens stood before the main gate, the gutted carcass of a deer beside them. The late afternoon sunlight glinted on their metallic armor.

"Come *on,* brother! You take all day."

The leading amazon lifted her bow as soon as she recognized Hasan as a stranger. The deadly hunting arrow followed his progress unwaveringly.

"Sister! Wait!" Rose cried breathlessly. "Don't shoot him. He's my brother!"

The leader frowned under her veil. She was a hefty, muscular woman, handsome rather than beautiful. This was evidently the oldest sister. "We have no brother," she said, increasing the tension on the bowstring, much to Hasan's alarm.

"I adopted him," Rose said. "He escaped from Bahram, the evil magician, and now he's ours. A son of Adam!"

Magic words! The women behind the leader jostled each other. Hasan could see that they ranged from sleek to voluptuous. They studied him as eagerly.

The arrow lowered. "Put him in the stable for the night. I'll question him tomorrow." The women picked up the carcass and marched on into the palace.

"See, she likes you," Rose said.

Hasan was amazed when he presented himself for the formal interview the following day. The eldest sister sat on an ornate couch, dressed in bright red pantaloons and a matching shawl. Her hair hung almost to her waist in jeweled splendor, and her eyes above the copious veil were dark and enormous. She wore a headdress like a small golden crown, and looked every inch

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the quees she was. He had misjudged her badly, in her rough armor.

"Tell me your story," she said abruptly. "All of it." The manner, at any rate, had not changed.

Hasan went over it again. The queen's interruptions, unlike Rose's, were intelligent and to the point. Exactly how had Bahram produced gold? How many months had the voyage on the sea lasted? Why had he come to the palace? Did he understand the obligations and restraints implicit in formal Brotherhood?

Hasan, realizing that his stay at the palace and quite possibly his life as well depended upon his answers, replied with complete candor. There was now no doubt in his mind that the seven princesses were what they professed to be; the jinn would never have needed to question him like this. But the queen did not relent. She rapped out her queries with a severity that belied the luxuriousness of her softly garbed body.

"Do you realize," she said, watching him narrowly, "that no man is permitted here except our father the King? Do you desire to stay with us, even though you know you will be horribly executed if he ever learns of your presence?"

Hasan had not known. Of course that would be the case. Why had the King isolated his lovely daughters here, if not to deny them the company of all men and thus prevent their marriage? How terrible would be his wrath if he caught a male intruder!

"There are settlements on the island," the queen said. "The natives are not of the True Faith, but traders do pass every year or so. We can

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provide you with money to buy your passage home. In this manner you will be safe."

Now Hasan thought about Bassorah, and his dull life there as a marginally successful goldsmith. The adventures would be over, the attractive sisters of the palace forever parted from him. He had thought only of returning home, until now—but the opportunity to do so brought serious second thoughts. At Bassorah he would look out upon bleak plains during the hot season, interminable swamps during the wet season, his dreams behind him. At all times there would be the great rivers and the ocean—and when the ships from far ports came in he would remember that he had visited paradise ... and given it up because he lacked the courage to remain.

Tears came to his eyes as he felt the immensity, the weight of that tedium descend upon him. What use was life at all to a man alone and unloved and unable to accomplish anything that had not been better accomplished by others before him? Surely death was better than this, if it was an honorable demise for the sake of true companionship. For the sake of Rose and her charming sisters.

"How is a man to desert his sisters?" he asked her. "The will of Allah, the Compassionate, the Merciful, shall prevail. If you would have me stay, I shall stay."

The queen removed her veil. "Welcome, brother," she said—and at that signal the room was filled with excited, unveiled girls.

They had been hiding behind the curtains all the time!

Hasan was nearly buried in their affectionate embraces. "Laud to the Lord who guides us into the path of deliverance and inclines fair damsels' hearts to us!" he exclaimed.

There were eager introductions now; but he could not remember all the elaborate names at once, and settled upon "Eldest," "Second," Third," and so on down to the youngest, Rose, in his own mind.

Hasan was never alone after that, nor did he want to be. Even at night Rose would come and sit on his bed, the delightful younger sister, and tell him tales of old Serendip and of their marvelous kingdom in Sind, on the mainland. The others seemed to take turns with him during the day. At least, he found himself escorted by one or two, while the others busied themselves elsewhere, and never by the same girls on consecutive days. He kept his peace. He loved them all, and the constant variety and implied flattery were highly stimulating. Rose, of course, followed no rules; she had proprietary rights.

Eldest took him on a private hunt. She showed him the monstrous wild elephants browsing in the jungle, shy vegetarians despite their size, and the great eagles soaring high above the hills. She trained him to the bow and spear and the short sword. When he shot an arrow into the flank of a happy earthgrubbing boar, far smaller than the powerful wild swine of the Bassorah swampland, and did not kill it with that shot or the next, he learned a lasting lesson. Suddenly the innocuous creature was a charging brute, and he had to finish it off desperately with his sword, overwhelmed by the vicious squeal

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and stink of it and its spouting blood upon his arms and chest. Now he knew that this was also the way of a man under attack, and was forever warned against the careless or inexpert application of weapons. As a True Believer, he could not even eat the flesh of the pig he had killed, since it was an unclean animal. He had won a pointless battle.

Second, a tall regal woman of classic beauty, showed him the palace. Room after room was filled with elegant furniture, rare colored glass, and panels of teak and ebony set with jewels of every type: sapphires and rubies plucked from nearby streams, and many less common stones. Pillared courtyards contained merry fountains and ornamental statuary, and pleasant fruit trees grew beyond sculptured arches. Careful geometric designs decorated every wall and hanging rug—reproduction of the human figure being forbidden—and even the common candlesticks were of ivory, and the lamps of ornate silver. Never had he seen such fabulous wealth, and his mind was overwhelmed with the ever-increasing splendor of the vaults. Caliph Harun al-Rashid himself, the Commander of the Faithful and ruler of the empire, could hardly display such opulence.

Third was a pleasant girl, plump of bosom and round of face, who took him to the gardens. All about the palace grounds were trees and shrubs of marvelous size and grace. Nutmeg, cinnamon, guava, fig and coconut-palm grew in the vast cultivations, and the strange jak tree with its heroic fifty-pound fruit hanging from the trunk, and its brother the breadfruit tree, in the guise of the champion of watermelon plants. She showed him the magnificent cultivated orchids on the walls, and in the pools the immense flat disks of lotus leaves, their pink and white floating flowers the harbingers of the narcotic lotus seed. And finally she showed him the small oranges of the most deadly strychnine plant, the same that Bahram had gathered for his neferious purposes; her word of caution was unnecessary.

Fourth was robust, lithe and vigorous, and she led him a merry chase farther afield. She exposed him to the hills and dales beyond the palace, where solid carpets of exquisite nelu flowers stood knee-deep and concealed everything beneath. Ferns sprang up the size of small trees, and everywhere the crimson and gold flowers spread out their enchantments. And suddenly there was a sheer cliff, a smaller version of the rift at the Mountain of Clouds, where the monkeys gathered in the evening with incredible hullabaloo. On the way back they admired the large fan-palm, said to flower only once in fifty years, and whose leaf could be used as paper. Hasan asked her about the origin of the metal chains by which he had descended from the magician's trap; she knew of them, but not of their source. The chains had existed as long as anyone had knowledge of the mountain.

Fifth had a mouth like Solomon's ring and huge purple-painted eyes. She conveyed Hasan to an interior room that was dark even at noon, ignited naphtha torches set in the

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floor, and danced for him. As she moved her amber body under the almost transparent robe, the silken undulations accentuated her breathtaking breasts and liquidly supple hips. Muscles Hasan had hardly known existed flexed her abdomen, her buttocks, and he forgot the intricate art of the dance itself in his exceeding regret that he could never be her lover. Brotherhood itself was not the entire restraint, for adoptive siblings could marry; but she was one of seven. Love, in the physical sense, was a crime outside of marriage, and no man could take more than four wives, nor marry two sisters. Concubines were limited only by his resources and ambition; but which of these princesses could he degrade to such status, and he a common merchant? But more: he would bring ruin upon them all if he were to violate the personal sanctity of these protected maidens, no matter how willing they might be. Sisters they were, irrevocably. But the dance awakened voluptuous longings, nevertheless ....

Sixth was the sister he had first met playing chess with Rose. She played the game with him also, but her moves and strategy were far more adept than his, and he was embarrassed to be so easily mastered by a woman. She took him to the library, where scroll after scroll was neatly rolled and filed. Here was documentation for the stories Rose liked to tell, and much more besides. But Sixth, unlike the others, expected him to contribute as well as receive: she made him dictate not only the details of his journey, but everything else he knew about geography and philosophy, while she gravely recorded the information. She drew from him the whole of his knowledge about the working of gold and other precious metals. Never had he felt so subtly inadequate, as his own voice exposed the pitiful paucity of his information. He had so much still to learn!

Rose was a constant joy. She it was who comforted him when he proved unequal to the task of bringing down game for their food supply, or selected inappropriate gems for some new palace decoration, or expressed his thoughts less than cogently for the library record. She answered his questions and listened raptly to his problems and cheered him with the honeydew of her lips, and he marveled that he could ever have existed without her passionate sisterhood.

"Why is your father determined never to allow you to marry?" he asked her. "I'm sure it wasn't just a matter of pride."

"Well, no," she admitted, not enthusiastic about this subject. "You see, Sind is far from Baghdad, and never was part of the Prophet's empire. My father was converted to the True Faith in his youth, when he traveled west, but his people haven't really changed. All of the neighboring Kings are Hindu. Daddy didn't want to embarrass those royal suitors by telling them that their religion wasn't good enough—"

"But why not? They should be ashamed to be infidels!"

"I *told* you. We're far from—"

"I see," Hasan said. "Now I understand. They're too far away to pilgrimage to the Holy City, and they

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probably expect you to adopt *their* cult. That would be intolerable."

"Would it?" she inquired in a rare pensive mood. "Is it really better to die a spinster than to accept another religion?"

"Of course. The curse of Allah would fall upon anyone who deserted Him."

"But what about the curse of Brahman?"

"I don't understand. What does Brahman matter?"

Sixth overheard the conversation and joined it. "I would marry an infidel," she said, "so long as he didn't interfere with my own belief."

Hasan was shocked. "An infidel!"

"In many ways the Hindus are just as devout as we are."

"How can you say such a thing!"

Rose got into the spirit of the argument. "Brother, would you refuse to marry a Hindu damsel if she wouldn't change her religion?"

"Certainly."

"Even if she were a princess, like us?"

"She couldn't be like you. An infidel!"

"And very beautiful?"

"No!"

"How about a Buddhist maiden?"

"No!"

"A Chirstian?" Rose teased.

Hasan choked. "A Christian! That's worst of all."

The two girls laughed. "Worse even than fire worship?"

Hasan suspected a trap, but they gave him no time to anticipate it. "Didn't you say you were going to marry Bahram's daughter?"

"Not after I found out about him," he replied uncomfortably. "Anyway, I don't think he has a daughter."

Sixth shook her head. "That man has been around. He may never have married, but he might have a daughter somewhere." This was the height of insult to the Persian.

"Well, I wouldn't marry her."

Rose studied him impishly. "She would be as fair as he is ugly, and a sorceress, of course. She could cast a spell over you and make your yard stand up, just like that." She made a magical gesture.

By this time the remaining sisters had appeared, and Hasan hastily changed the subject. "I thought you hated Bahram, after what he called you."

"What did he call us?" Eldest demanded.

"He made us all out to be ghouls and demons and devils!" Rose cried indignantly, remembering.

Eldest reddened. "We must surely slay him!"

"What connection did you have with him?" Hasan wanted to know. "He wouldn't tell me."

The princesses grinned. "He came here the first year we moved in," Eldest said. "He must have thought the palace was still deserted. He had this handsome young Moslem with him, as fair as the moon, all tied up. We freed the young man and drove off the magician, but next morning the lad was gone. Bahram must have tricked him into going on to the Mountain of Clouds. Foolish boy."

Hasan remembered the bones, but did not comment. He had been as easily deceived.

Hasan was sitting under the trees by the side of a fountain, idly looking

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down into the valley while Rose babbled merrily, when a motion attracted his attention.

"Look—someone is coming."

"Get out of sight, brother!" Rose said. "It might be our father's party."

Hasan, in these months of relaxation, had almost forgotten the inherent liability of his position. He obeyed with alacrity, diving behind the fountain.

"No—those are camels," Rose announced, relieved.

Hasan stiffened. "Camels! That's Bahram the magician!" Suddenly the time he had spent in blissful company with the princesses was as nothing; the Persian was back, and revenge was a holy duty.

"I'll tell my sisters," Rose said, "and we'll arm ourselves and cut him down."

"No! I must do it myself!"

She looked at him with surprise, but did not argue.

That night they watched the magician's party camp somewhat beyond the palace. There were three camels—where did the replacement come from?—and a young man of surpassing favor. But Bahram cuffed and beat him, and the lad was in further difficulty because his hands were bound before him. He had to eat and drink by raising both hands together. His clothing, once elegant, had been soiled and torn from incessant use. Hasan saw himself, as he had been a year ago, in this handsome captive, and was hard put not to cry out in protest.

But Eldest was wiser than he. "Wait until he stops at the Mountain of Clouds," she said. "Then we may come upon them while the magician is distracted, and he will not have time to harm the boy. If he saw us coming, he would surely use the Moslem as a hostage."

"All right. But I must be the one to kill him."

"Of course. Only have patience, brother, while we make arrangements."

"It is my right," he said uncertainly, put off by her ready agreement. "Allah has granted me revenge."

Eldest smiled with understanding, and Rose led him away.

Hasan spent a restless night, and even Rose could not pacify him. He remembered the first time Bahram had occasioned such turmoil, in Bassorah, with the dream of easy gold. Then came the first night as prisoner on board the ship, smarting from the cruel beating, bound for he knew not where and terrified for his life. Then that desolate night on the Mountain of Clouds, foully betrayed a second time by the magician and left to sojourn with the rotting bones of his predecessors.

And now the final night, precursor to revenge.

Next morning they brought out armor and fitted Hasan in a manner befitting King David. Under his tunic he wore a coat of mail, covering his body down to his waist and elbows. On his head rested an iron cap with a bright feather headdress. He slung the jeweled scabbard of a sharp short sword over his right shoulder. He rode upon an elephant.

It was noon before they were ready to ride. Sixth stayed reluctantly behind to watch the palace, and the

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rest rode with Hasan toward the Mountain of Clouds. They, too, were armed, and he could tell by the manner Eldest selected her arrows that she expected to use them. The princesses did not have quite the confidence in his prowess they professed.

Hasan was sick with impatience at the delays this preparation had caused—but he also could not conceal from himself the fact that he was still afraid of the magician. Thus he both chafed at and welcomed the passing hours that postponed personal decision, and fasted more because of an unsettled stomach than to obtain blessing from Allah.

As the elephant picked its way through the jungle with dexterous speed, reducing a day's journey to a matter of hours, Hasan had time to regret his insistence upon his sacred duty of revenge. True, this was in strict accord with the word of the Prophet, and he could hardly consider himself to be a man if he failed in this—but he was not a killer, however bold his fancy armor might make him appear. How could he take a human life?

Then he thought of Bahram's crimes against himself and countless other youths, and rage burned away the doubt. It was certainly no crime to slay such an idolator!

And yet again he wavered, wondering whether the Persian really did have a daughter who would thus be rendered an orphan. Was it fair to a beautiful damsel to—

Eldest watched him with compassionate but narrowed eyes, and fingered her stout bow. Hasan was ashamed, but could not say why.

They came upon Bahram's encampment in mid-afternoon. Two camels grazed at a distance; the third had already been slaughtered and gutted. A fire smoldered where the magician had baked his smelly cakes. Thepretty youth was still bound, his frightened eyes peering over the gag as though it were a veil.

Bahram's high voice could be heard from a distance, cursing and threatening the captive. "Get in this hide, O cowardly cur of the gallows! Did I bring you all the way here to have you balk now? I will only release you when you agree to perform the simple task I ask; then you shall be free for the rest of your life. I guarantee this! By the Fire and the Light, I will beat you senseless and throw you in the carcass bound, if you will not do what I demand!"

The magician's back was to their party, and he was so transported by his simulated tantrum that he was not alert. Hasan forgot his fear, slid off the elephant, and ran up behind Bahram. "Hold your hand, O accursed!"

The Persian whirled around, amazed.

"O enemy of Allah and foe of the Moslems!" Hasan cried, almost slashing himself with the sword in his anxiety to draw it from its scabbard. "O dog! O traitor! O infidel of the flame. O you that walk a wicked path, worshiping the evil fire and light and swearing by the shade and the heat!"

Bahram's tone was abruptly mellow. "O my son, how did you escape? Who brought you to earth again?"

Hasan refused to be moved. "He delivered me who has now appointed

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me to take your life. I will torture you the way you tortured me, and all the other innocent youths. O miscreant! O atheist! You have fallen into your own trap, and your evil fire will never save you now!" He raised the sword, aware that he was talking too much instead of acting.

Bahram, surprisingly, did not draw back. He stepped forward. "By Allah, O my son, O Hasan—you are dearer to me than my own eyes. I called to you to come down off the mountain, and when you did not answer I thought you were dead. How glad I am that you are safe."

Hasan drew the sword back to strike. "Don't try to fool me with lies about your concern for my welfare. You broke the sacred bond of bread and salt!" But he was still postponing action....

Bahram's eyes were wide and innocent. "O my son, how can you blame me for what you thought I did, whey you yourself have done no less?"

Hasan's sword wavered. "What?"

"Look!" The magician whirled, removed his turban, drew out a package of powder and walked toward the fire.

"Stop him!" Rose cried. Hasan had forgotten the sisters standing not far behind him. "He intends sorcery!"

But still Hasan hesitated, and while he watched, Bahram threw the powder into the glowing embers.

The flame roared up. Smoke puffed out in a yellow mass, sweetly scented and forming a billowing ball. "Look, Hasan!" the magician cried, pointing.

A picture formed within the haze. Hasan recognized a house—his own house in Bassorah, but with a difference. A tomb was set up in the middle of it, and before it crouched a woman, a hag so wasted away that her skin was a multitude of yellow wrinkles and her black shawl fit her shrunken body like a tent.

It was his mother.

The image vanished. "How can you talk of bread and salt when you dwell here in luxury, while your own dear mother mourns this very moment before your tomb?"

Hasan stood bemused. How, indeed, could he have been so callous toward the one who loved him most? He had never even thought of her, these months.

The magician was before him, reaching out a skinny hand. "Now give me your weapon, son, and we shall—"

Hasan's defensive instinct took over. "No!" he cried, bringing the blade up in an attempt to ward the man off.

But Bahram was already leaping forward, the sympathetic mask discarded. The point of the rising sword pushed into his throat, and so desperate was his leap that the magician impaled himself upon it and severed the tendons of his own neck. Blood spurted over hand and blade.

"Magnificent, brother!" Eldest cried, hauling him out of the way as the corpse fell toward him. "Never have I seen a neater stroke! He didn't even have a chance to curse you before he died."

Hasan looked upon what he had wrought and felt the bile of his stomach distending his cheeks. Eldest closed immediately and slapped him sharply across the

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mouth, concealing her action in a grandiose embrace. Hasan swallowed involuntarily. "You're a hero; act like one!" she barked into his ear.

Then they were all about him, congratulating him on his valor and prowess and marveling at his composure in the face of danger.

"O Hasan," Rose cried, "you have done a magnificent deed and avenged our honor and satisfied the thirst for vengeance that pleases the King of the Omnipotent!"

"I have?" But in the face of their unanimous acclaim and evident disregard for the horror of the slaughter, Hasan could do no less than act the part. He strode over to the youth and untied him. "Everything here is yours," he said, while the young man gaped. "You may come with us or take the camels, whichever you wish."

Hasan opened the magician's pack, took out the kettledrum, and beat it with the strap. The two remaining camels came up immediately. "Do you know how to control these beasts?" he asked the youth. "Can you find your way back to the ship? You own it now, for the idolator's soul has returned to the fire. Pay off the crew and sell the merchandise you find aboard and you'll be a wealthy man."

The youth mounted a camel and left without a word. "I can't blame him for being afraid of us," Hasan remarked, watching him go. "After being tortured by the magician, and seeing the vision in the fire—"

"What vision, brother?" Rose inquired.

"Why, the house with my mother in mourning, and the tomb in the middle. Didn't you see it?"

Rose shook her head, looking at him with concern. "I saw nothing but a nasty cloud of smoke, all ugly and yellow. It's a good think it didn't get in your eyes and blind you, so that Bahram could escape."

Hasan glanced at the others, the forgotten kettledrum dangling from his hand. None had seen the vision.

"Let's dump this corpse in the camel-carcass," he said. "This time the roc will have a meal, if it can chew it!"

Chapter Five

Hasan soon forgot the vision in the excitement of the palace celebration. After all, it had been a conjuration of an evil magician, a sight no one else had seen, and was probably only a false trick to stay his vengeance. But the ploy had failed. Now he felt like a man!

But a second trial of his strength was soon to follow. A cloud of dust rose from the plain beyond the palace.

"That's our father's host!" Rose said. "O Hasan, run to your room and conceal yourself—or if you prefer, go down into the gardens and hide among the trees and vines, for it is death if they find you here."

Hasan wasted no time. He went to his chamber and locked himself in.

He lurked behind the parapet adjoining his room and watched the cloud rise up until it darkened the welkin. Before long it opened, and beneath it was a conquering host like a surging sea, marching troops advancing on the palace.

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For three days he suffered through the perpetual clamor of foreign troops being entertained, mad with jealousy because they ate at the banquet tables while he devoured scraps smuggled up by Rose; because their coarse voices laughed in the company of the seven princesses, while he had only stolen moments with one. It had seemed his own palace for so long that he suffered when reminded so blatantly that it was not; he didn't like being an imposter who had to hide lest his life be instantly forfeit. He who had killed the magician!

On the fourth morning Rose came to him with worse news. "We have to leave you, brother, for a while," she said.

"Leave! Why?"

"One of the kings is getting married, and we are expected to attend the festival. So daddy has summoned us home, so we can enjoy it all."

Hasan groaned. "How long will you be gone?"

"It may be two months."

"Two months!"

"But we'll be back just as soon as we can make it, Hasan. And you can stay right here in the palace, and no one will bother you, and everything will be all right. I'll give you all the keys."

"Keys!" he muttered, but there was nothing he could do.

She produced a massive chain of them. "But Hasan—"

"Yes?"

"You can go anywhere you want in the palace, except one door: I beseech you, for myself and for my sisters—*your* sisters—don't open that door. There is nothing there you need, and I'm afraid there will be a great calamity if—"

Hasan smiled. "Don't worry. I'll behave!"

She kissed him. "Keep your eyes cool, brother. Farewell."

She left, and within hours everyone was gone. Hasan watched dolefully as the great party marched across the plain, leaving nothing but drifting dust. He was alone.

He was alone. Never in his life had he felt such continued isolation, as he tread the loud floors and gazed down empty halls. He had not realized how terribly dependent he had become upon the bright company of the seven cheerful maidens, nor how deeply he would feel their absense. Even the living orchards were somber, and paradise without companionship was torture.

He rode forth bravely by himself and slaughtered game and prepared the meat and ate it, alone. He visited each of the princesses' apartments in turn, fancying he could somehow commune with the owners; but their rich trappings and feminine adornments only served to remind him that the girls who used these things were gone.

He tried to divert himself by exploring the less familiar chambers of the palace, for there were many reaches and hallways he had never penetrated. He found behind one door an open court with a graden like that of the angels; the trees were of freshest green with shining yellow fruits, and pretty little birds were singing pleasantly. He walked among them and smelled the delicate breath of flowers, and almost believed he

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could hear the praises of Allah in the avian melodies.

He opened another door and faced what resembled a spacious plain set with tall date palms and watered by a running stream whose banks were rich with flowery shrubbery. It reminded him of his home city, Bassorah, the city of dates, but did not ease his isolation.

In other rooms were bulky colored marble artifacts and decorations of precious stones and sandalwood and other wonders beyond remembering. Buy physical wealth alone could never take the place of human fellowship. How he longed for his sisters' return!

Only one thing took his attention from his loneliness: the thought of the forbidden door. If there were wonders such as he had seen in the open portions of the palace, what might not lie behind that secret portal?

"My sister would not have asked me to stay away unless there were some tremendous secret!" he told himself. "But what could she have to hide from *me?*"

He remembered her dire warning against this door, and resolved to restrain his curiosity and inquire when the princesses returned. But then it occurred to him that they, having concealed it from him this long, might refuse to enlighten him later. If he really wanted to know the secret, he had no choice but to discover it now, while there was no one to stop him.

"By Allah!" he said, then paused because he knew he was taking the name in vain. One should not invoke Allah to witness an improper deed. "I will open that door and learn what it conceals, though death is there!"

He took the key and unlocked the forbidden door. He stepped back. Suppose there were some ravenous beast inside, waiting with bared fangs? He should have come armed!

He locked it again, unopened, and went to don mail and sword. He returned, turned the key again, pushed the door open with his foot while raising his sword defensively, and stood ready for the rush of whatever might come.

In that, at least, he was disappointed. No creature emerged, no sound, and the gloom of the room was absolutely still. Why hadn't he thought to bring a lamp or torch?

He ran to fetch one, cursing himself for his stupidity. He lit a torch and came back—to discover he'd forgotten to close the door! The thing might have escaped!

Cautiously he poked his head in, ready to leap back instantly. There was nothing, as the light flickered to the farthest corners. The chamber was empty.

He shut the door locked it, and tried to reason out the meaning of this mystery. Why had Rose made such an issue over *an empty room?* Had this been set up as a joke, and were the sisters laughing even now to imagine his confusion? Rose was certainly capable of such a thing—but somehow he could not believe that she would have tricked him this way when she was not on hand to watch the result. She liked to appreciate her little jests personally. No—she had been serious, and must have had a better reason to put him to this torture of uncertainty.

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Or *had* the room been occupied? He had left it open; if a demon lurked within, it would hardly have sat idle when escape offered. Did it creep stealthily along the passageways at this moment, waiting for him to pass? Was it cunning, knowing that he must sleep sometime? Was this the disaster Rose had feared, already loosed upon the palace?

Hasan looked nervously behind him. Was that a noise? Had he seen something, something that vanished just before he turned?

Already he heartily regretted disobeying his sister's instruction. But if he was to live, he had to undo the damage he had done. First he had to learn what kind of thing it was, so he could devise some means to kill it. Assuming it was a *live* creature....

Perhaps it had left a footprint.

He unlocked the door a third time, lifted his sword, and looked in with frightened boldness. Once again the torch brightened the corners. This time he saw that thick dust lay everywhere. There were no footprints. It was obvious that no one had occupied this room or even visited it for many months.

Either there had been no inhabitant, or—

A fragment came back to him suddenly. He had mentioned a remarkable bird, thinking of the roc, and they had reacted strangely. It had not been the roc that worried them. Had it been a bird in this chamber ... or some other flying thing?

Yet a bird would have had to perch sometime, and it would leave droppings....

He moved into the room, glancing apprehensively into the upper corners. There were no ledges or perches. Featureless walls met a featureless ceiling. His own tracks in the deep dust were the only sign of molestation.

His tracks! They would betray him! He would have to sweep out the entire chamber to erase them, and hope that no one would check until an even layer had formed again. Meanwhile, he should search every foot of the room for whatever clues there might be. He had only guessed it might be an animal; probably it was something else entirely. Some magic object, perhaps. Some dangerous magic relic.

He glanced into an alcove. "Idiot!" he cursed himself. He had missed the obvious again. There was a stair ascending from the alcove, winding up in a vaulted spiral into the dark. The secret was not in the room itself; it lay above!

He was fully committed now. He dared not stop until he knew the exact nature of the danger that confronted him. He mounted the stair, the torch flickering with the shivering of his hand. His fear increased as the space constricted and the minutes passed without any break in the still tension. What if a sinuous dragon lay above, waiting to roast him in a downward spiraling column of fire? He could never retreat in time.

The stair coiled around like the stomach of a python. He could not see the base below nor the termination above. Where was it leading?

Light! After two complete loops, the end was coming in sight. He climbed into an open dome that overlooked the roof of the palace.

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He hardly dared feel disappointment. He still had no idea why he had been warned away from this. He looked about.

The roof was a terrace, and as he gazed upon it he was amazed to see the entire palace grounds laid out before him. To one side the wall dropped off to expose the rising towers and minarets, and the open pits of the courtyards with the cultivated trees spreading their gentle foliage up. To the other side—

A new world greeted him. The main roof of the palace was a garden more magnificent than any he had seen below, set with trees and flowers and softly flowing streamlets and even a shining lake, the wavelets shimmering across its surface in the breeze. Beside the lake was a pavilion constructed of alternate courses of bricks: two of gold to each one of silver, studded with jaycinth and emerald. Four alabaster columns rose to support the ruby dome, and within it a mosaic marble platform extended into an interior pool, a soft veil of green silk above the crystal waters.

"This must be the thing my sisters forbade me!" Hasan said, marveling at the beauty of the scene. But still he wondered why they should not have wished to share the ultimate glory of the palace with him. Surely the sight of such beauty would not in itself bring destruction?

He approached the pavilion and discovered that it was even richer than he had supposed. The center, around the sparkling pool, was a sitting room whose benches were thrones of polished stone latticed with red gold and inlaid with enormous pearls and symetrically disposed gems. Above the pool was a trellis set with jewels the size of pigeons' eggs, and on it was a climbing vine bearing grapes like rubies. Brilliant birds fluttered upon it, of a type Hasan had never seen on Earth, and their warbling seemed to celebrate the glories of Allah with throats of miraculous sweetness.

"What king could own a place like this?" Hasan exclaimed. "Or is this Many-Columned Iram, the property of no mortal man?" And he sat down within the pavilion and glanced around him in continued amazement, hardly aware of the passage of time during his contemplation. Had he once dreamed of mundane gold?

He was roused from his reverie by motion in the distant sky. Quickly he rose and ran to the stair ... in case. But it was only a flight of birds approaching from the heart of the desert plain, and he could tell by the steadiness of their passage that they intended to roost on the palace roof and refresh themselves there. They were beautiful creatures with spreading white wings, and he did not wish to frighten them away. He ducked down and hid inside the little dome sheltering the stair, concealing himself as well as he could while keeping an eye on the formation.

They came, beating the foliage with the wind from their spectacular wings. These were enormous birds. They were smaller than the rocs, but larger than the eagles or buzzards. They lighted on a mighty tree by the water, then dropped to the ground and paraded toward the pavilion.

There were ten of them, and their leader was a hen of remarkable

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beauty, sleek and haughty and a veritable queen among birds, strutting and pecking at the lesser ones who did service to her. Hasan was not surprised to see that brids had their royal personages, just as men did; this was the natural state of the kingdoms of Allah.

They filed into the pavilion and perched upon the great stone couches there. Hasan craned to see what went on inside, but the pillars interfered with his view at crucial moments. They were doing something, stretching out their wings and twisting their torsos with the most unbirdlike byrations and clawing at their downy breasts. Had they come here to slay themselves with exercise?

Lo! The shapes of the birds collapsed, and suddenly Hasan pawed at his own eyes to relieve them of an impossible vision. For there were no longer birds in the pavilion, but people! How had this happened?

Too stunned to move, Hasan watched as the ten daughters of Adam stood up, maidens whose beauty shamed the brilliance of the full moon. They wore the filmiest of gowns; but in moments they drew off even these and threw them aside and plunged naked into the pool.

Hasan stared as they bathed, and not merely from surprise. These were high-bosomed virgins as lovely as any he had seen. The vigor with which they washed and sported, shrieking and splashing each other, only served to enhance their youthful pulchritude. Most striking of all was the princess—for such she had to be—who swashed and dunked the others, but upon whom nobody laid hands in turn.

As he watched, he remembered with a hot rush what had been missing from his happy life with the seven sisters. They **were** his sisters, which was the trouble. There was that a man could not do with his sister. They *were* beautiful—but there were beauties a man could not view in his sister. He loved them all—but there was love that could not be shared among sisters.

Hasan stood behind a post, gazing upon the maidens while they thought themselves unobserved. The sight of their dancing breasts and wetly quivering thighs excited his mind to lecherous promptings. His loin grew hot. He sighed to be among them in that pool, touching what he could only glimpse at the moment and caressing what he could only dream about. He felt a flame that could not be quenched and a desire whose signs might not be hidden.

The chief damsel tired of the sport. Bidding her companions to remain, she stepped out of the pavilion and stood, unknowingly, directly before Hasan's blind. She stretched her sleek limbs and combed out her long hair, dazzling him with the splendor of her person.

Her body was exquisite in the afternoon sunlight, gleaming with dripping water and seeming to shine with its own sublimity. The luster of her face outshone the resplendent moon; her dame hair curled around a bosom whose outlines were no less than the masterwork of Allah. Her neck was a bar of silver smoother than that of a gazelle; her teeth gleamed, perfect hailstones in the sun. Her belly was softly rounded and

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delightfully dimpled. Her buttocks projected generously, resilient as cushions filled with ostrich-down, and strove against each other when she walked, shaping and reshaping the darker shadows of their separation. Her thighs were heavy and firm, expanding columns embracing that same shadow.

She sat upon the low wall of the pavilion and lifted her lithe legs so that she could brush the sand from dainty feet, and there was revealed to Hasan, as from behind a cloud, what lay between her thighs.

It was midafternoon when Hasan was startled from his trance by the clear voice of the royal maiden. She spoke in a lovely language he could not comprehend, but his imagination filled in the words. They were obvious in the context: "O daughters of kings, the hour is late and our home is far away. Come—we must depart."

The girls arose and went to the benches in the pavilion. They were dressed now, but they took up the feathered suits and behold: they were birds again! They filed out, spread their wings, and ascended into the sky.

Hasan stood bemused, unable to credit his senses. Had the damsels really transformed themselves to birds before his eyes, or had he suffered another delusion like the one Bahram had shown him in the fire? Could he really have looked upon the naked glories of an incredible woman, even to that which no unmarried man was privileged to see?

Only when the last speck vanished beyond the clouds did he think to ask himself the basic question: could he really have fallen most passionately in love with an alien princess who could transform herself into a bird?

Hasan hardly remembered dragging himself down the stair and back to his own chamber. He lay without appetite or thirst, drowned in a solitude suddenly magnified tenfold. For it was true: he was smitten by the beauty of the bird maiden, and he was unable to rest in her absence. All night he tossed about, finding no comfort, and he wept and moaned with frustration until morning.

When the sun rose he rushed out of his room, entered the forbidden chamber with no thought of danger, and mounted the spiral stair to the roof. All day he waited, growing faint from the heat of the terrace and from lack of nourishment, but the bird-maidens never came. When his hope at last expired, he fell to the ground in a fainting fit. There was no one to comfort him.

The cool of the evening roused him. He crawled down the steps on hands and feet and dragged himself back to his room. There he passed out again, and lay on the floor all night, dreaming of beauty and sorcery.

On the following day he made his way to the terrace once more, but the pavilion was deserted. His love was gone. After that he stopped looking. His life became a delirium of melancholy lamentation and unrequited love.

For the first time, he was sorry he had not died on the Mountain of Clouds. He had approached the forbidden door with a raised sword to

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guard his body—but it was his heart he should have protected.

When the seven sisters returned from their visit to their homeland, Hasan roused himself and hid, ashamed to show himself to them and wishing only to die. For they had warned him, and he had stubbornly violated their trust, and now he had to bear the penalty of his deceit. He no longer deserved their company.

Rose didn't wait to doff her traveling-gear, but dashed immediately to Hasan's room. She found it sadly disarranged, and her brother nowhere in sight. She searched everywhere in growing anxiety—and finally found him slumped in a closet, thin and feeble. His body was so shrunken and his bones so wasted by starvation and fatigue that she hardly recognized him.

"O Hasan!" she cried. "What has happened?" But his sunken eyes only flickered in the pale face. He did not answer.

She gripped his emaciated shoulders and dragged him bodily to the bed. "O my brother—I would give my life to save yours! Tell me what illness has befallen you."

Hasan felt her sympathetic embrace and wept. What could he say to his well-meaning sister? His mouth opened.

When parted from the thing he loves,
A man has naught but woe to bear.

"But Hasan—"

Inside is sickness, outside doves;
His first mere fan

"What are you saying, Hasan? I don't understand!"

Her confusion was natural; he himself did not comprehend what was happening. Still he found himself unable to state his case.

Rose fluttered er hands, thoroughly shaken. "You're dying, O beloved. How have you fallen into this terrible plight? We told you we would come back—"

The birds took flight and went away
And gave me Love's death blow.

"The birds took—"

I'll keep my secret while I man—
Ah, but Love's needs must show!

Rose stared at him, appalled. "Hasan—you opened the door!"

It was out. Now would come the punishment he deserved, the censure. He had brought it on himself.

Rose cradled his head against her bosom, crying without shame. "O Hasan, Hasan—we meant to spare you this. I should have thrown away that key!"

But in a short time her natural exuberance reasserted itself. "By Allah, O my brother, I will not abandon you now, though my life be forfeit! Tell me everything, and I swear by the bond that binds us together I will help you somehow."

Now everything that was within him poured out, and he told her of the terrible passion he had conceived for the beauteous bird-maiden, and how he had been able neither to eat nor to sleep since seeing her. "My heart is gone," he finished, "She has flown with it, and I have no wish to live any more."

Rose wept for his misery, not

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condemning him at all, then brightened again. "O my brother, be of good cheer and keep your eyes cool and clear. You'll see her again, and if it is the will of Allah Almighty you might even win her. I'll help—"

"But what can you do? She's gone."

"I don't know, Hasan; but whatever it is, I'll do it. Now you've got to eat something. Promise me you'll eat if I sneak some fruit to you. I can't get anything else while my father's troops are downstairs."

Hasan promised, encouraged by her certainty, and shortly she was back with an armful of breadfruit and coconut. "But remember, Hasan—don't breathe a word of this to my sisters. I'm afraid of what they might do if they found out. If they ask you about the door, you must tell them you never went near it."

"But how shall I explain my illness?"

"I'll think of something. My sisters won't see you until the escort departs. You must stay here and try to get well. We can't do *anything* if you don't get strong again, Hasan."

It was the turning point. Hasan was weak and uncomfortable, but he did begin to eat. When the King's troops left, the other sisters came to see him as a group.

"You have not been exercising, brother," Eldest said, and Fourth nodded agreement. The others looked concerned, for this careful understatement could hardly justify his obvious emaciation.

"I *told* you, sisters," Rose said. "Our severance from our dear brother left him desolate, for the days we have been absent were longer than a thousand years to him, a stranger in the palace and solitary, with none to keep him company or cheer his lonely heart. He is just a youth, and maybe he remembered his poor mother, who is very old and ugly, and thought of how she weeps for him all day and all night, mourning his absence. We used to bring him solace with our society and keep his mind off such things. But when we deserted him—"

"We understand, sister," Eldest interrupted gently.

They gathered around him, comforting him and offering dainty tidbits for him to eat. They bemoaned his yellow color and shrunken flesh and promised never to desert him again. They told him of the wonders and rarities they had seen on their journey and of the splendor of the wedding in Sind. And if they had reservations about Rose's story, they did not say so in words.

A month passed, but though Hasan's health improved, his melancholy hardly abated. When he closed his eyes he saw the face of the bird-maiden, her mouth as magical as Solomon's seal and her hair blacker than the night of estrangement after his own love-despair. Her brow was as bright as the crescent moon on the eve of a feast after long fasting, and her eyes were those of an innocent gazelle. Her nose was straight as a cane, her cheeks like bright anemone, lips like coral and teeth like strung pearls. She was perfection.

Her lips are sweet as honey, in their virginity;

Keener than a scymitar, the glance she cast at me!

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His body had recovered, yes, but his spirit remained waxen. All of his longing and the extemporary couplets spawned by it could not make real the intangible vision. The bird-maiden had cast no glance at him, and had no inkling of his existence. If she **had** seen him, she would have flown that much sooner.

At the end of that month, Eldest organized a hunting and birding party of several days' duration. Rose declined to accompany them. "By Allah, O my sisters, I cannot join you while my brother is in such plight, too ill to take proper care of himself. I must stay and comfort him until he is well again."

Eldest replied with a half-smile: "Allah will reward you for your efforts on behalf of our brother."

The six princesses rode forth without delay, carrying with them supplies for well over a fortnight. "Perhaps he will be better when we return," Eldest said wisely as they parted. Rose missed the significance.

Rose watched them until they were well out of sight and the noise of their animals faded. Then she went eagerly to Hasan. "Come, brother," she said. "Show me the place where you saw the maidens."

Hasan, too, had observed the departure of the hunting party. "Yes, sister," he agreed. He jumped to his feet and promptly collapsed. His enthusiasm was greater than his strength, despite the improvement of his color.

Rose put her arms around him where he sprawled, letting his head rest between her breasts while she hauled him upright. An observer might have suspected that she took more time than was necessary. "Just hold on to me, Hasan. I'll get you there somehow."

He found that he could walk well enough, with her support, and his strength gained steadily, now that they were taking positive action. They stumbled through the forbidden room—his old footprints still plainly visible, for he had forgotten to dust—and up the spiral stair to the terrace.

"That's it," he said, pointing to the splendid pavilion.

"Now show me just where they came from, and where they went, and describe everything you saw them do."

Hasan obliged, sparing no detail. He paid particular attention to the chief bird-maiden and the marvels made manifest by her nudity.

Rose paled, obviously upset. "O my sister," Hasan inquired, "what is the matter? Why are you so wan and troubled?"

"I am *not* jealous," she snapped. "Let's get out of here."

Hasan had to make his own way down the steps. Rose led the way briskly to the library. "I didn't have a chance to look while my sisters were here," she explained, "but there must be some information on this. All I know is that those bird-maidens come every month or so to spend a day sporting in the pool, and we leave them strictly alone because there is powerful magic about them. We knew you'd get into trouble if you saw them; that's why we tried to keep you away. Something awful would happen if they caught a man spying on them."

"I must have her," Hasan said.

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Rose paced around the library. "We have books on everything. If only I knew where to look."

"What's that scroll on the table?"

She picked it up. "This must be something my sister forgot to put away." She glanced at the title. "Hasan! This is it!"

"Glory be to Allah, the Omnipotent!" It did not occur to either of them to question this coincidence.

"Listen to this, brother," she said, excited, and began to read. "She who visiteth the pavilion on the roof of the palace, with her handmaidens and damsels of the court, is the daughter of the sovereign of the jinn; the most puissant of their kings, who hath dominion over men and jinn and wizards and chiefs and tribes and cities and islands without number. He hath immense wealth in store and kings are his viceroys and vassels and none may avail against him for the multitude of his troops and the extent of his empire and the muchness of his moneys. He hath assigned his daughters a tract of country a whole year's journey in length, a region gird about with great rivers and oceans, and thereto none may attain, nor man nor jinni, without his cognizance. He hath an army of women, smiters with swords and lungers with lances, five and twenty thousand in number, each of whom, whenas she mounteth steed and donneth battle-gear, eveneth a thousand knights of the bravest.'"

"I knew she was a princess," Hasan said.

"'Moreover he hath seven daughters, who in valor and prowess excell the amazons, and he hath made the eldest Queen over the country aforesaid. She is the wisest of her sisters and in valor and horsemanship and craft and skill and magic excells all the folk of her dominions. There is none more beautiful than she, and....'"

Hasan nodded agreement as Rose plowed through the description with something less than perfect grace. "She is my love," he said.

"But Hasan—it is death to desire her. Her father would send his jinn to smash this palace and everyone in it, if you even admitted to looking at her. She *can't* be as desirable as all that."

"I'll die if I don't possess her."

Rose glanced further along in the text. "Hasan ..." she said quietly. "She is not of the True Faith."

"My soul is hers," he said simply.

"Now this is my plan," Rose explained a few days later. "According to what I have learned, your bird-maiden will be here again before my sisters return from the hunt. You can never catch her as long as she has the plumed skin, the cloak of feathers, because that is the handiwork of the jinn. But we can overcome that if you follow my instructions exactly."

"Yes, O my sister!" Hasan said. His responses were considerably faster now, and he felt stronger.

"You must take your place at dawn and stay well hidden until they come. Don't let them see you, or we will all lose our lives. We're lucky you didn't bring calamity upon us all the last time. Stay close to the pavilion, though. When they take off their feather-suits, make sure you know which one belongs to the damsel you

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love. Then steal it and hide it, without being caught yourself. She can't return to her country without her suit; when you master it, you master her."

"But suppose they *do* see me?"

"They'll kill you. Then they'll fly home and tell the King, and he'll destroy us all, and our father's kingdom too."

"Why wouldn't she take one of the other suits?"

Rose squinted thoughtfully. "I don't think the magic works for anyone else. I mean, it has to be tuned to the individual ... I don't know what I mean. We'll just have to try it and see. If I'm right, her companions will take off without her. Only then can you safely approach. By that time she'll know that it isn't just an accident. Don't let her beguile you with sorrowful words, either. She'll say 'O thou who hast robbed me of my raiment, restore it to me, for I am in thy hands and at thy mercy!' If you relent—"

"She speaks a different language," Hasan pointed out.

"I know. With thostrich-down hind-parts ... Anyway, if you relent and give back her suit, she'll arm herself with its magic and kill you and bring the vengeance of her sire upon us. Better not let her know you have the suit at all; hide it and keep it, and she will be your prisoner. Then carry her down to your chamber, and she will be yours."

Hasan was pleased with her advice. His sorrow left him and he felt up to the most difficult task. He kissed her, ate a hearty supper, and slept well that night.

He woke before dawn, took food and drink, said his prayers, and went to the terrace. He decided immediately against trying to hide inside the pavilion itself; they might approach it from any direction and sniff him out before the transformation. He could not trust the tree nearest it, either, because they landed there. He finally stayed right where he had the first time: under the shelter at the top of the stairs.

Nothing happened. At dusk Rose brought him meat and drink and a change of clothes, and he slept right there on the terrace. It was the same the following day, and the next, but he did not give up hope. On the contrary, his vigil seemed to improve his outlook, and he felt better than he had in a month. He rejoiced when he saw the new moon come, for he remembered that this had been the time of the month when he had spied the maidens before.

And the birds came! Once more they arrowed across the plain from the distant ocean, circled the palace, perceived nobody, and alighted in turn and trouped into the pavilion. Hasan hoped the calamitous beating of his own heart would not betray him.

Again they doffed their suits and stood revealed as beautiful girls. The loveliest of all was the princess. Hasan never took his eyes off her until she set aside the feather-suit; then he fixed its place in his mind with exceeding care. If he made a mistake, he would get the wrong girl ... and the princess, warned by the episode, might never return.

He waited, tense with excitement, as one by one they entered the pool.

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The last to go was his love. For agonized moments he was afraid she wouldn't swim at all, this time. She finally joined the others.

Hasan clenched his teeth to prevent their chatter in the violence of his emotion, and crawled toward the pavilion. He was in plain sight, now; if one of them happened to look this way, he was done for. But they shrieked and splashed each other merrily, oblivious to everything outside the pool.

Their noise even covered the involuntary sounds he made crawling through pebbles and brush. Allah was with him—so far.

He reached the wall of the pavilion and hunched beside it, invisible for the moment unless one of them chose to come and look over the edge. But the hardest part of his task was just ahead.

He crawled cautiously to the place where the surrounding wall dropped down to form the entrance. He would have to go inside, for the suit he was after was beyond his reach from the outside. Why hadn't he thought to attach a hook to a line, and fish for it!

He paused. Would it be better to retreat, and wait for the following month with better preparations? He could lose everything by this precipitous urgency. Then he heard the glad laughter of the princess, and his heart was charged with renewed determination. He had to have her **now**!

This was the key move. He could not tell whether they were looking his way except by poking out his head. Once he did that, the spear was cast. Either they spied him or they did not; it was the chance he had to take.

He moved, and saw the pool, scarcely twenty feet away. One girl was facing him! He froze, panic-stricken, as she squinted her eyes, brought her hand up. He heard her say something in that strange language. Then another girl came to her and peered into her face.

Relief! She had a speck in her eye. He crawled quickly into the pavilion and hid himself behind the nearest bench. Success was so close, now; he had only to circle a quarter of the way around the pool and grab the feather-suit from behind this protection. If only they stayed in the pool!

The happy squeals continued. The backs of the benches farthest from the entrance were hollow. It seemed that the builder had economised on the expensive stone and brick. Hasan approached the suit, reached up...

There was a sudden lull.

"What's the matter, Mistress?" The language was foreign, but that was what the tone said. Had he been spotted?"

The noise and laughter resumed in a burst. He had worried for nothing; apparently it had been some momentary girlish game, damning up the twitter only to release it all at once. He had to remember that: the words he thought he heard were homunculi, and could not be trusted.

He reached up again, found the suit, took hold of its soft material, and yanked.

It came down with a thud, the feathers rattling against the stone. This time the abrupt silence was no mistake. They had heard!

How could he have been so stupid! He should have brought the cloak

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down gently, a contour at a time, so that no noise could result. Now—

There was a burst of chatter. Hasan lay where he was, translating the sounds with a certainty that went beyond language. "What was that noise?" "Someone is here!" "Kill him!" Should he jump up and run for it now?

No—they could easily catch him, and that would be the end. Even if he made the stairs, and slammed the door and escaped today, all would be undone when they reported to their King. Not only his own life. The lives of all his sisters, and their father too.

What could he do? Their steps were already sounding on the pavement circling the pool. He was trapped.

He could play dead! Perhaps, that way, they would at least spare the palace, thinking that a stranger had died on the roof without the knowledge of the sisters. Of course, they would quickly detect the warmth of his body ... but he was still a little sallow from his illness, and if he pretended unconsciousness, this would be all the more evidence that no one had cared for him. He hoped.

He straightened, lying prone on the tile—and rediscovered the space under the bench. He rolled into the cavity without thinking.

The bricks were solid on the side facing the pool, meeting the polished stone without a chink. Appearance was everything, fortunately. He was invisible again. He might yet escape, if they didn't search too carefully.

If there weren't any snakes or spiders or leeches lurking in this dust....

There was the slap of wet feet against dry brick, and another exclamation. "Princess—your suit is gone!" What else could they be saying?

A soprano hubbub immediately over his head. Bare toes, dainty and beautifully anicured, coming to rest inches from his face. In spite of his predicament, Hasan thrilled to the satin smoothness of that foot, the slender perfection of the ankle. This was the foot of the princess, tantalizingly close. He was strongly tempted to slide forward and kiss it, and to Tophet with the consequence!

His nose itched. The smell of the feathers was—

He bit his tongue. The pain seemed to stave off the oncoming sneeze, for the time being.

"My cloak—it fell off the bench!" What a delightful voice belonged to that foot! Such a voice, incomprehensible or not, was well fit to die for.

Tapered fingers descended, grasping the cloak. Hasan's breath stopped in his throat as he thought of the nakedness of that hand and that foot and the body connecting them. What might he glimpse if he poked his head out and looked up now? Was death too great a price to pay?

Melodious laughter. "That was all—your suit fell down!" "We were worried over nothing!" The foot withdrew, flicking a last droplet of water onto Hasan's nose, and the crisis—and opportunity—was over. They were returning to the pool.

But he still didn't have the suit! And now he could not be sure which one was hers.

Hasan sent off a fervent prayer to Allah, reached up once more, cast about blindly upon the bench—and

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touched the feather-suit. She had not moved it.

He brought it down—carefully—and maneuvered his body to head in the direction of the exit. This was not easy to do without sitting up, and the magic robe encumbered him. It was light—as light as a feather—but bulky, and although he knew it was his enemy he could not bring himself to damage any part of it. This was an article of *her* clothing, that once had clung to her marvelous ... but nothing she had touched deserved destruction at his hands.

The return-plunge through the entrance, the anxious hesitation outside the wall—these were things he must have done, but he was never able to remember them. The worst was over. They had not discovered him, and he had the suit. If they continued bathing just a little longer....

They did, and Hasan made it safely to the shelter of the stairs. It was merely a matter of time, now, before he achieved his desire.

But the suit! What was he to do with it? If he kept it here the damsels would see it, and all his exploits would be rendered meaningless. If he took it into the palace, the princess might escape during his absense.

Escape? They could do nothing in his absence that they couldn't do as readily in his presence. He must secure the feather-suit first; then he could do what he liked.

He descended the steps and carried the cloak to his chamber. He emptied the clothing from his largest chest, laid the beautiful feather-dress in the bottom, piled other things on top of it, and closed the lid and locked it.

The girls on the terrace had not missed him. He stood concealed by the stairs and waited for the inevitable.

This time the princess—actually, he supposed she was the Queen, but she seemed so young—took a walk in her delectable green dress, arranging her hair with strokes from a jeweled comb. Hasan had never imagined anything so lovely. Looking upon her noble serenity, he was sorry that it was to be so short-lived. Not for anything would he hurt this elegant creature ... but he had to capture her and tame her before he could worship her.

Midafternoon, and the group prepared to fly. Now at last the shrieks began in earnest. Hasan stayed hidden, watching as the princess beat her breast and tore her elegant raiment; but her magic plumage was gone, and she was helpless. Her handmaidens wept and searched every cranny of the pavilion and the water and shore and vegetation around it—but as the shadows lengthened, they donned their own suits and departed.

Hasan felt a fierce sympathy for the princess, for this scene brought poignant memories of his own hour of dismay, years ago. He had been a young heir in Bassorah, and friends had congregated daily at his house to share the feasts. Then, when his carelessly-spent wealth ran out, they had deserted him—as these maidens were deserting their mistress in her hour of need. Had they stood by her, he would have been able to do nothing. They could have ransacked the palace and recovered the feather-suit. But not one of them cared to risk

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her life by staying the night.

Dusk, and the princess was alone. She sat naked on the wall of the pavilion, silent in her despair. Briefly she raised her head and spoke desolately to the one she must have known was listening, and once more Hasan seemed to understand. "O who has taken my dress and stripped me cruelly, I beseech you to restore it to me and cover my shame, for the night is upon me and I am alone." Then she wept.

What empathy he had with her! He could not treat her thus. He would fetch back the —

She heard his motion and spread her arms as if to fly, helplessly. The time had come.

Hasan stepped out from his hiding-place and stood before the damsel. "Do not be afraid of me," he said soothingly. "Daughter of majesty, I love you."

She had been beautiful in serenity and lovely in sorrow; now she was tantalizing in fright. She leapt up and ran around the pavilion, her long tresses sailing out behind. Hasan was afraid that in her desperation she might forget again that she could not fly, and fling herself off the palace roof. He had to catch her immediately.

He chased her. She screamed and tried to hide behind a tree; his action was compounding her terror. How had he gotten into this? Wouldn't it have been better to let her fly in beauty, than to kill her through terror? He could still return to his chamber, bring out the suit—

She plunged headlong for the edge. He leaped, reached out his hand, and caught her rich black hair. She was snared. He brought her, birdlike, to him, and circled her slim waist with his arm so that she could not escape.

She fluttered and fought, her ruby mouth open in a soundless scream, breasts heaving in pathetic but alluring panic. But the loss of her feather-suit had robbed her of vitality. Her struggles diminished and ceased.

Never had Hasan felt so much like an unclean swine.

Captive, she walked passively beside him as he brought her to the stair. She was beautiful even in pathos. He hooked his hand again in her hair and kept his eyes away from her body as she preceded him down into the palace. He was ashamed, now, to look at her.

Hasan guided her to his chamber, set her on his bed, and threw a striped silken cloak over her. He left her there, weeping and biting her hands in grief. He locked the door and rushed to find Rose for further advice.

Rose met him in the hall. She was carrying his nightly meal, not realizing that this had been the day. "I've got her!" he shouted. "Now what do I do?"

Rose accepted the news with limited enthusiasm. "I was afraid it would work," she said. "Well, I'd better go talk with her. *You're* not good for much, right now."

She set course for Hasan's room, still bearing the tray. "What about my—" he began, hungry now.

"Go find your own," she told him sharply. "*She* has to eat too, you know." He retreated to a garden and plucked some fruit, feeling ashamed.

Time passed. Night came upon the

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palace, and still Rose did not emerge from his chamber. Dim light shone under the door, which was locked against him. He had a key, of course, but took the hint. He put his ear to the door and listened.

Rose was talking. "... so he took the feather-suit and burned it, and waited until you were alone so that he could bring you in. He did not mean to harm you, or even to frighten you; he did all this only because he was mad with love for you. You know how these Arabs are. Otherwise he would not have pined away without eating or sleeping, all for your sake, and almost died before we found him."

A muffled weeping was the only reply.

"Now I know you can't understand my words any more than I can understand yours, except that we both are women," Rose continued steadily. She employed the tone she would have used to soothe a wild bird. "When my sisters return, we'll see about teaching you our language. It is only the will of Allah that we are able to talk with Hasan, you know, for most of the people we know in Sind speak the dialects of the continent. But that's another story, and you don't want to hear about language and geography right now, do you. I'm going to leave you here for the night, and you'll see that no one is going to hurt you. And if you can understand anything at all that I'm saying, think about this: woman was not made except to be loved by man. Hasan isn't bright, but he is handsome and he loves you and he will make you a perfect husband. He is naive but very nice, and that is exactly the way a man should be. If you respond to him and treat him decently, he will be your slave for life—and that is more important than all your father's palaces and troops and magic. I would gladly change places with you, but Allah did not grant this thing to me. You are the one he loves, and the sooner you come to terms with this the happier you'll be. You think you're the captive, but the truth is that *he* is the captive. Have pity on him and give him the chance he deserves. You could have been served with more bitter fruit."

Hasan tip-toed away.

The bird-maiden was subdued in the morning, and appeared to be resigned to her fate. Rose brought her food and talked to her and dressed her in a clean robe, and moved her to a chamber of her own so that Hasan could recover his room. This relieved his alarm lest the captive discover the feather-suit, so near at hand all night. He stayed well clear of the proceedings, dismayed that his sister should have to promote his suit, but certain that he would botch things horribly by himself.

Two days later Rose summoned him. "She's doing better now," she said, but something in her attitude renewed Hasan's feeling of guilt. "I think she knows more of our language than she pretends. It's time for you to talk to her."

"Right now? Hasan asked, immediately bashful.

"You have to meet her *sometime,* Hasan." Rose took him firmly by the arm and trotted him to his room. "First I'll have to make you presentable, though. No woman would find you attractive if she saw

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you the way you usually hang around the palace." She covered the catch in her voice by bustling through the collection of robes they had provided him. "Put this on. And comb your hair. And clean off those sandals—here, I'll find you better ones. Go take a bath."

Hasan was changed and groomed, willy-nilly. "Men have no taste in clothing," Rose complained. "They'd never get married at all if it weren't for women." She led him to the bird-maiden's chamber. "Now speak softly to her, Hasan—remember, she has to be tamed. And take her a present—here, I'll get you something suitable."

"Maybe I'd better wait until tomorrow—"

He found himself before the forbidden door of the captive's chamber, an attractive bouquet in his hand and utter confusion in his mind. "I can't," he whispered, shaking.

Rose paid no attention. She opened the door, pushed him inside, and slammed it behind him.

The princess reclined on a divan, so astonishingly lovely he could hardly look at her directly. She wore a light veil which only increased her allurement, and a dress of scarlet satin that set off her coal-black hair in a manner that took Hasan's breath away. Most notable was the robe she graced: it was thrown loosely over her other garments and was decorated in red gold with figures of wild beasts, and birds whose eyes and beaks were gems and whose claws were red rubies and green beryl. Her neck was embraced by a chain of great round jewels, and even her slippers sparkled richly.

Hasan stumbled across the room and held out his bouquet. She ignored it. He was left awkwardly supporting the flowers in sweaty, trembling hands. "Princess," he began, but could think of nothing more to say.

Dark lashes flickered contemptuously. How could he ever have aspired to such a woman! She was the daughter of a mighty king, while he was nothing but a merchant's son. He could not even speak in her presence without choking over his stupid tongue. He was not worthy to kiss her feet.

Kiss her feet. The vision of her bare ankle beside the pavilion bench came to him. He had almost been ready to sacrifice his life for the privilege of a single gesture, then. Could he do less now?

Hasan dropped to his knees, put a quaking hand to her outstretched slipper, and took it off. He set the flowers aside and gently massaged the sole of her foot. Arabian women, he knew, were quickly mellowed by such treatment. He kissed it, and suddenly the words were undammed.

"O princess of the fairest, life of the lovely sprites and delight of all who behold you, be easy in your heart, for I come to you only in order to be your bondsman till the Day of Doom. I might have captured one of your handmaidens, but not one of them compared to yourself in beauty and grace, and indeed there is not in all the world a fairer maiden than you.

"O my lady! I have no desire except to take you as my wife, after the law of Allah and the practice of His Apostle, and to journey with you to my own country. And I will buy you

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handmaidens and chattels, and my mother, who is the best of women, will do you service. There is no finer land than mine; everything there is better than elsewhere, and its folk are pleasant and bright. Only consent to come with me and let me worship in the light of your smile, and—"

She had not spoken a syllable or moved a toe, but he had to break off at the sound of knocking from below. Someone was at the front gate! The sisters had returned!

He was tonguetied again. Quickly he replaced the slipper, as though tidying furniture, and stood up. He left the flowers on the floor.

"I must go," he said, backing away. "But I love you."

She made no sign.

Downstairs he found the six sisters in their hunting clothing, soiled and tired and laden with game. "Welcome!" he cried.

"You look much better, brother," Eldest said, eying his elaborate outfit. He had forgotten to change! "We'll join you shortly." And the six retired to their rooms to clean up and don more feminine apparel.

Hasan looked at their collection of game. They had taken gazelles and wild dogs and leopards and even a small bear. It had been a good hunt.

In due course the sisters emerged from their chambers, refreshed and delicately robed. Hasan went up to each in turn, kissing her and expressing great affection. "Why so friendly, so suddenly?" Fifth inquired, flattered. "Did you have a fight with Rose?" Second asked. "I'm glad to see you so much improved, Hasan," Sixth said. "I wonder whether we came back too soon," Eldest said, "or too late."

Hasan was abruptly overwhelmed by his own deception, seemingly so transparent. Why had he wooed a foreign damsel, when these were his true friends, his dear sisters? The hot tears came to his eyes. He was unworthy of them.

They quickly noted his distress, and turned inquiring glances to Rose, who had just appeared. But Rose remained aloof, letting Hasan solve his problem himself.

"We thought you were over this sadness, brother," Third remarked. "Do you miss your mother and your native land? We would not hold you here against your will. We love your company, but rather than see you weep, we will equip you and send you home again."

Hasan looked about, startled. "By Allah, sisters, I could not leave you!"

"Which of us has vexed you, then?" Second asked, softening. "Why are you so troubled, when we thought you were doing so well?"

Hasan stood silent, unable to come up with any reply. How could he tell them the truth? They might be furious, and cast him out and kill the princess....

He noticed that Eldest and Sixth stood a little apart, no longer participating in the questioning. They suspected!

Rose finally filled the silence. "Maybe our brother caught a bird from the air, and wants you to help him tame her," she said maliciously. "A very pretty bird."

"Is that right, Hasan?" Fifth asked him. "Show her to us! We'll be glad to help. Tell us everything. How did you snare her? What does she look

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like?"

Hasan cast about in total confusion. How could he avoid telling them? Yet he was unable to begin. Why was Rose baiting him now, when she had done so much to help?

He went to her and got down on his knees and kissed the hem of her skirt. "I am ashamed," he said. "Please help me."

Now the tears came to Rose's eyes. "No Hasan—I am the one who is ashamed. Get up; I'll tell them." She led him to a couch and put her arm around his shoulders.

"O my sisters, when we went away to visit our father and left alone this unhappy one, the palace was too quiet for him and he fell to exploring all the rooms and courts of the palace for some diversion. He opened the door to the staircase leading to the roof—"

"Didn't you tell him not to—" Fifth broke in, alarmed.

"Perhaps I forgot, sister. He sat upon the roof, hoping to see the first sign of our return, and also to make sure no enemy came upon the palace unawares. Suddenly he saw ten birds approaching, and they lighted on the brink of the basin which is in the pavilion. He watched these birds, for they were marvelously strange, and saw among them one goodlier than the rest, who pecked the others, but against whom none of them dared to put out a claw. Presently they set their nails to their neck-collars and rent their feather-suits and became damsels like full moons. They fell to playing in the water, and the one who was the chief-damsel was fairest in favor of them all, and our brother was distracted by her charms and his heart was afire with love for her. Then they donned their feather-shifts and flew away home, and he fell sick with longing and repented that he had not somehow captured her. He abode on the palace-roof abstaining from meat and drink and sleep for a whole month when behold! the birds appeared again. So he stole the chief-damsel's feather-suit and burned it and when the others flew away he siezed her and carried her into the palace."

"You mean she's here?"

"Locked in a special chamber," Rose replied.

"What does she look like?"

"She is fairer than the moon on the fullest night and her face shines brighter than the sun. The dew of her lips is sweeter than honey and her shape is more slender and supple than tall cane. Her eyes are black as the night and her brow white as a flower. Her bosom—" here Rose took a breath as though to suppress a tinge of envy. "Her bosom is as bright as a jewel, and her breasts are twin pomegranates and her cheeks apples. Her waist has beautiful dimples and her navel is as smooth as carved ivory and her legs are alabaster columns. Surely she is goodly of shape and sweet of smile, and ravishes all hearts with her splendid symmetry."

"In other words," Eldest said dryly, "a pretty girl. Hasan, you'd better show her to us."

Where was the shock, the outrage? They hardly seemed surprised. Dumbly he led the way to the princess's chamber and ushered them in. The bird-maiden seemed not to have moved a muscle since Hasan had left her in the morning, but the

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flowers had been removed.

They stood in a semicircle, studying her, while Hasan fidgeted. What would their judgment be?

Eldest turned to him and clamped her hand upon his shoulder. "Brother—you have excellent taste in women." She smiled.

The trial was over almost before it had begun. It was all right! They had accepted the bird-maiden.

"Well, let's not dawdle." Eldest was gruff. "What's happened has happened, and obviously Hasan will have to marry her. Sister, you know something of her language, don't you?"

Sixth, the librarian and scholar, nodded. Hasan had a retroactive suspicion about the book left so conveniently on the table, and indeed, about the entire series of events following the sisters' return from their visit home. How much had they known?

Sixth spoke unintelligibly. The bird-maiden's head lifted. She looked sharply at Hasan, first with royal indignation and then, slowly with heavy-lidded appraisal. He wondered just what Sixth was saying to her. Finally the princess inclined her head, and Eldest stepped to her side. What was going on?

Sixth beckoned to him. "Brother, go to the storeroom and fetch a good handful of gold. Hurry."

"But—"

She shoved him out the door and closed it behind him. This was the second time this had happened today, and he still wasn't quite certain what it signified. He heard animated conversation behind him as he went for the money.

When he returned, his sisters were seated in a circle on the floor, and Rose was quietly crying.

"Put the money on the table, Hasan," Sixth directed, and he did so. It came to him like a dawning sun: this was the betrothal! The bird-maiden had agreed to marry him!

"Sit down," Eldest said, indicating a space immediately before her. He crossed his legs and sat. She raised her right hand and clasped his, pressing her upraised thumb against his.

Sixth came over and dropped a handkerchief over the joined hands. "Glory be to Allah, the Compassionate, the Merciful, and blessed be His Prophet, in whose name we perform this ceremony," she intoned solemnly.

"I hereby betroth to thee," Eldest said, tightening her grip on his hand, "the damsel for whom I act as deputy, Sana of the Isles of Wak, for the dowry duly presented." Sixth translated for the watching bird-maiden, who nodded.

It was Hasan's turn. "I accept from thee her betrothal to myself," he said, hardly believing it.

They recited the opening chapter of the Koran, and it was done. "Come—we feast!" Eldest said, and guided Hasan down to the banquet-hall where everything was miraculously spread out.

Hasan was able to remember almost nothing of the celebration that followed, except that it lasted all afternoon and well into the night and matched the splendor of any royal wedding. Sweet sherbets were served instead of the forbidden alcoholic beverages of corrupt courts, yet

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somehow his head spun more dizzily with every glass he downed.

That evening he entered the nuptial apartment, and she was there, standing in her bridal gown, waiting. He removed her veil, the veil that would never conceal her face from him again, and once more was dazzled by her beauty.

She lifted off her silken dress and showed him her breasts, delights fit for caliphs, half-hidden by the flowing hair of her head. She dropped her petticoat trousers and revealed to him her remaining delights, this time intentionally.

Hasan became a man of action. He rose and threw her on the bed and rent the veil and opened the gate and broke the seal and pierced her every secret; nor was it misery that kept him sleepless throughout that marvelous night!

Perhaps it was well that he did not remember that his sisters were standing outside the chamber door, thankful for the sounds of his good fortune and remarking upon them ... but nostalgic for the similar joys forbidden to each of them.

Hasan stayed at the palace with his bride for forty days, and his affection for her and delight in her love increased. He did not question the sudden ease with which she had yielded herself to him, nor worry unduly that the joys so readily gained might as readily be lost again.

Bit by bit he learned her language, and she learned his, and his satisfaction mounted as he came to comprehend her mind as well as her body. She was clever but docile; her learning had versed her in many things, but once she had given herself to him, these things were his.

The seven sisters eagerly assisted the couple, making every day a holiday and every meal a feast. They congratulated him upon his marriage, and Sana the bird-maiden upon hers. Even Rose became reconciled, discovering that the sharing of affection did not after all diminish it, and she remained as close to Hasan as she had ever been.

It was the happiest period Hasan had ever known. Sana, too seemed content; she never spoke of her lost feather-suit or of the mighty kingdom left forever behind. She had known from the start that the handmaidens who had deserted her at the pavilion would never dare return home; all of them would have been executed for their betrayal.

Perhaps it was Sana's royal training that gave her the courage and spirit to accept her situation. Certainly she never hinted otherwise.

Chapter Six

At the end of that forty days Hasan had a dream. He saw his mother mourning for him. Her bones were wasted and her complexion had turned to yellow parchment. She was near to death from sorrow, while Hasan was in excellent health. She saw him, and cried: "O my son, O Hasan, how is it that you live such a life of ease and luxury, but forget your old mother? Look at my plight since you were taken from me! My tongue will never cease repeating your name until I perish, and I have made a tomb in my house, so that I can not forget you. O my son, if only I

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could have you with me again!"

Hasan's joy deserted him. He woke with tears in his eyes and sorrow in his heart for the great wrong he had done his mother by neglecting her. More than once he had been reminded, but each time he had selfishly put the matter from his mind. What if she died before he saw her again? This time he would have to act; he would have to make it right.

But how could he leave his beloved sisters, who had done everything for him and even obtained for him his lovely bride? He tossed on the bed, and could not return to sleep though the dawn was long in coming.

In the morning Rose came in with a smile on her face. "Get up, Hasan," she said. "Man's work may last all night, but not all day as well. Give your poor wife a rest."

When Hasan did not reply, she turned to Sana. "What's the matter with him? Didn't you treat him properly last night?"

Sana shook her head in bewilderment. "He scream in dark," she said, still slow to pronounce the unfamiliar words. "Roll over, not say word, not sleep."

"Didn't you ask him?"

"Not talk to me. Sad, silent."

Rose plumped down on the bed beside Hasan. "Come, brother, tell sister. What ails you?"

Hasan groaned, but roused himself and told her his nightmare. Rose listened, understood, and ran from the room.

Soon all seven sisters appeared. Their countenance was grave. Eldest took the initiative: "Brother, we shall not hinder you from visiting your mother. Do as you will, in Allah's name, and we will help you by whatever means we may."

"We've had you for over a year," Rose added, muffled. "It couldn't last forever."

"Go with our blessing," Sixth said. Her voice also had a catch. "But you must promise to visit us, if only once a year."

"I promise!" Hasan exclaimed, suddenly relieved. "To hear is to obey. Thank you, thank you, O my sisters!"

They made immediate preparations for the trip. The sisters gathered an immense store of wealth to give the traveling couple: entire chests of gold and silver and precious jewels, wardrobes of costly garments for Hasan and queenly raiment for Sana, and other gifts defying description. There were more than fifty caskets in all, not one of them light, and he despaired of transporting them the great distance to his home in Bassorah.

"Have you forgotten the magician's drum, brother?" Rose inquired sadly. "I'll show you how to use it."

Hsan *had* forgotten the drum. "But how can three camels carry all this?"

"You don't know much about magic, do you?" she said with a spark of her old enthusiasm. "Beat the drum."

Hasan obeyed, sitting beyond the gate and pounding it rhythmically with the strap in the way he had so often observed Bahram doing it. The sound of it bothered him, for it brought recollections of an experience that had not been happy. Before long the three dromedaries approached.

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Three? Twice he had seen one killed....

"Don't stop, Hasan—that's only the beginning."

Mystified, he continued, although the animals were standing right in front of him. Then he understood.

More beasts were coming, and not only camels. There were oxen and mules and horses and elephants—creatures from every part of the world, summoned unerringly by the drum. The plain was covered with their tracks, and an army of them milled about him.

They selected the finest animals and formed them into a caravan, loading each with the proper burden of gear. It took several days to complete the arrangements.

The seven sisters accompanied Hasan and his bride for the first three days, according to the dictates of royal ettiquette, during which time they accomplished a journey north that matched the one he and the magician had made in a fortnight. The animals were magically swift, when prodded. Apparently Bahram himself hadn't known very much about magic....

They approached the section where the sea barred the way. Far across the restless waters Hasan could see the mountains of the land beyond. "Here we must leave you," Eldest said, "for we dare not go beyond the limits our father has imposed upon us. But stay firm on the backs of your mounts, and they will carry you safely across."

Now was the hour of parting, and it was unbearable difficult. Each sister kissed Hasan affectionately while Sana looked on with an indifferent expression, and each bade him fond farewell. Rose was the last; but though she approached bravely with her little chin uplifted, her composure broke when she touched him. She flung her arms around his neck and wept as though her soul would fly.

Hasan held her, deeply touched; but the animals were impatient and he had to loosen her embrace. She slumped against him, her head lolling. She was unconscious.

Eldest came to pick her up, but Rose recovered at once from her faint and stood by herself. "O my brother," she said with pathetic calm, "if anything happens to you, beat the drum and choose the swiftest camel and come to see us as fast as you can."

"I will, my sister."

"And remember you promised to visit us every six months."

"Whenever I can, my sister." Now was not the time to quibble over the agreed period.

"And never forget that we love you, and—"

Eldest led her away, still talking. Hasan covered up his own tears by shouting at the caravan of animals. They plunged into the ocean and drove for the opposite shore.

He looked back, once, and saw the seven watching forlornly, Rose with her hair tumbled over her face in grief. Eldest waved—or perhaps she was gesturing him on—and that was all. He turned his face resolutely forward and did not glance back again.

It was a long and adventurous journey over plain and desert and mountain and valley, through burning

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sun and torrential rains, past elegant cities and deserted wilderness; but the blessing of Allah was upon them and after months of travel they reached Bassorah without calamity.

Hasan brought his caravan to the door of his house and dismounted. The domicile seemed oddly small, after his absence, though he knew that he was the one who had changed. As he put his hand to the door he paused. He heard weeping, as though someone within were fainting from sorrow and on fire with grief. For a moment he thought of Rose, inconsolable in her lovely palace, day and night; but of course she was not here.

He entered—and found his mother wailing before his tomb, exactly as the magician had showed him in the vision. She was emaciated beyond description, and he was amazed that she was still alive.

"Mother," he said, inadequately.

She looked up at him with staring eyes. "Hasan," she said, and fell to the floor in a faint.

He rushed to her and lifted her dry husk of a body and carried her to the divan, where he bathed her hands with water. As quickly as she had passed out, she recovered, and embraced him and kissed him. "Where have you been these two years, my son, and how did you escape the terrible Persian?"

"I slew him," Hasan said, his chest inflating slightly. "And now I have come home with riches not even the Caliph can match, and the most beautiful bride in the world!"

She was shocked. "Hasan! You married without consulting your mother!"

Hasan smiled to see her revert so rapidly to normal. "It happened suddenly, Mother, or I never would have neglected you. May I bring her in?"

"You brought that hussy *here?*" she screeched with a fine store of indignation. She jumped up as alertly as her state permitted and bustled about the house, attempting to abolish in a minute the disorder of two years.

Hasan went outside, unloaded the camels and other animals of his caravan, and dismissed them. He took Sana by the hand and led her into the house, heavily veiled.

"A wife!" the old woman was muttering. "I will not share the roof with—" Then she saw that it was too late. She collapsed on the divan, wringing her hands.

Hasan reached up to remove Sana's veil, since she was inside now, but his mother objected strenuously. "No!" she exclaimed, turning her back. "I will not look at her."

Hasan smiled and set his wife on the opposite divan. "Let me tell you of my advengures, Mother; then perhaps your heart will soften, for I know you are generous and forgiving." And while his mother sat with face averted, he recounted the whole of his adventures since his involuntary departure from Bassorah: the ocean voyage, the flight in the camel-skin, the betrayal by Bahram, the delight of the seven sisters, the revenge against the magician, his capture of the bird-maiden and the dream which brought him home to Bassorah again.

His mother relented enough to rise and examine the baggage, and when

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she saw the immense wealth and knew that they would never be poor again, her disposition improved somewhat. At last she condescended to look upon the King's daughter, Hasan's wife, grumbling all the while.

Hasan removed the veil and let Sana's beauty shine forth. The old woman halted her monolog abruptly, stunned. She stared for several minutes.

At length she recovered and put out her hand. "My son has mistreated you terribly," she said. "Imagine forcing a lovely child like you to ride a camel across the ends of the earth! Come, my daughter—I'll take care of you."

Next morning Hasan's mother took Sana shopping and bought her the finest furniture in the city, together with elaborate new clothing and utensils of solid silver and gold. No praise was too extravagant for the adorable bride, and no reprimand too sharp for the callous son.

Hasan bore up under the abuse with suitable dignity, hardly concealing his secret pleasure. He would not have had it otherwise.

But he was not allowed to relax. "O my son," his mother said, "we cannot tarry in this town with all this wealth, for we are poor folk. Already I have heard the neighbors whispering of alchemy. They will make trouble for us, be certain of that."

Hasan was appropriately contrite. This problem had already occurred to him—but his mother would never have budged if he had suggested that they move to escape the fury and avarice of jealous city-folk. "What can we do, Mother?"

"We must depart for Baghdad, where everyone is wealthy and we may dwell in the Caliph's sanctuary. Then you shall sit in a shop and buy and sell in the sight of Allah—to Him all might and majesty!—and no one will suspect the source of your fortune."

"Excellent advice, Mother! I shall do exactly as your wisdom prescribes." Hasan had not dealt with a magician, seven royal sisters, and a captive wife without learning something of diplomacy.

He swung into action. He sold the house, summoned the dromedaries, and loaded them with all their goods and gear. Then he took his mother and wife down to the great docks, where the two mighty rivers joined, and hired a craft to carry all their possessions.

The sail up the Tigris took ten days. The land on either side was flat and featureless, palm trees projecting on the horizon. Huge rafts of cut reeds drifted slowly downstream, twice the length of their ship but bearing only two or three men apiece. Camels traveled the banks of the river wherever the ground was solid enough to sustain them.

The marshes dwindled imperceptibly, and the irrigation ditches became sloppy and finally nonexistent. Toward the end of their trip the signs of civilization reappeared, and they came in sight of Baghdad, the fabulous Round City, with its elegant towers and minarets and spired showing above the mighty wall. This was the richest capital in the world. Only the chief city of Byzantium, in the land of the

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Christian infidels, was said to rival it in splendor. Hasan discounted such claims; every True Believer had to be wary of the lies of Greeks and Christians.

Along the river were many miles of wharves, and hundreds of vessels were docked there: merchant ships, pleasure craft, ships of war and even exotic colored boats from the lands beyond Hind. Local rafts of inflated sheepskin drifted down from Mosul, and on toward Bassorah.

Hasan, who had been here in his youth, described to Sana the manner in which the city was constructed, with triple brick walls rising almost a hundred feet above the plain and surrounded by the deepest moat. Four ponderous gates opened on highways that spoked the length and breadth of the empire. In the center of the city was the green dome of the Caliph's palace, the tallest structure in the city.

Sana said nothing, but Hasan fancied he saw a glint of respect in her expression. At any rate, she was looking intently at the palace.

They docked, and instantly had to fend off the throng of petty merchants, beggars, retainers, jugglers, fortune-tellers, money-lenders and thieves—though the last term could be applied comprehensively. Horses stamped nervously in the street, camels cried, and famished dogs prowled everywhere, looking for tidbits.

Hasan wasted no time in hiring a storehouse. He transported his goods there and left them under guard, then found lodging for his wife and mother in the khan—a place where shelter was available, but no food or service. Both women objected strenuously, but he turned a deaf ear. Next morning he changed his clothes and went into the city to inquire for a reputable broker.

Judicious disposition of coin soon brought him the man he wanted. "O my master, what is it that you lack?" the broker asked.

"I want a house—the most handsome and spacious one you have available for immediate occupancy."

The man appraised him unobtrusively, noting the quality and fit of his dress and the impartial certainty of his manner. Then he showed the way to a high-class merchant's domicile. Hasan took one tour through its halls and frowned. "If this is your best, I am dealing with the wrong broker."

Without a word the man brought him to the mansion of a former wazir, the ranking minister to the Caliph preceding Harun al-Rashid. It was fashioned of quality brick and rare stone, with handsome pillars beside the massive front entrance, and pointed arches showing the way to a fine central court with palms and flowers and a clear flowing fountain. It hardly rivaled the palace of the seven princesses, but Hasan was satisfied that it was the best he could expect in Baghdad. He purchased it immediately for a hundred thousand golden dinars.

He proceeded next to the storehouse and had his goods moved into the residence while he went to the market and bought carpets and household vessels and a complete staff of servant-girls and eunuchs, and one little Negro boy for the house. Then he brought Sana and his

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mother and let them exclaim as they might.

They were settled in Baghdad.

Three years passed in peace and happiness. Sana bore Hasan two gracefl ss, ne of whom he named Nasir and the other Mansur, and he could not have asked for a more sanguine existence. The old lady was as delighted with her grandchildren as with her daughter-in-law, and ran the household with taste and dispatch.

One day Hasan brought himself up short and realized that he was bored. He possessed everything he had dreamed of as am immature youth—but he missed the adventure he nce had known. He had sadly neglected his dear sisters, the princesses of Serendip, and had broken his promise to visit them regularly.

The memory brought irrisistible nostalgia. He had to visit his dear sisters without delay! Obsessed with longing, he went to the market and bought trinkets and costly material and delicious confections and all things calculated to delight girls who could not go shopping for themselves.

"What are you up to, Hasan," his mother wanted to know. "We don't need those things."

"I propose to visit my sisters, who showed me every sort of kindness and gave me all the wealth we presently enjoy. I owe them far more than this."

His mother looked uneasy, but could not deny his logic. "O my son, go if you must, but do not stay away from Baghdad too long."

Hasan was relieved that she offered no more protest than this. "Where's Sana?"

"I left her sleeping on a couch. I'll fetch her for you."

"No," Hasan said quickly. "There is something I must tell you about her privately." She leaned close, eager to receive the confidence. "You know, O my mother, that my wife is the daughter of a King who rules over the jinn, and who has more troops and treasure than any monarch we know of except the Caliph himself. She is the dearest of her father's children. She is high spirited, and I'm afraid of what she might do if she went out into the city alone, for she was not born to the True Faith and only wears the veil because I command it. Yet I love her with all my heart, and I would quickly die if anything happened to her. I'm afraid for her safety even when the wind blows."

"I understand, my son."

"But more than this, I must tell you a secret I have revealed to no one. When I captured her I threw her feather-suit into the bottom of a trunk and told her I had burned it, so that she could never escape. I don't think she would have married me, if she had known that her feather cloak still existed. I didn't burn it; it was too beautiful. and it would have been like burning part of her—a thing I could never do. I buried that chest in a storage closet in the back of the house. Watch over it, in case she should happen upon it. If she recovered that feather-suit she might fly away and take her children with her, and we would never see them again. Make sure you never say a word about this to her."

"Allah forbid that I do such a

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thing!"

Neither of them saw Sana retreat from the curtained doorway, or heard her quiet return to her couch. When Hasan came to bid her farewell, he mistook her subdued smile for a pleasant dream.

There was no premonition in his mind of the disaster he had wrought by his carelessness. He went outside the city a reasonable distance, beat the magic kettle-drum, loaded the dromedaries, mounted, and rode for Serendip at a great rate, never pausing longer than he had to.

The princesses were overjoyed to see him. Rose threw her arms about him once more and wept, this time for happiness, then proceeded to berate him soundly for neglecting them so long. They set up a mighty feast, and everything was as it had been before, with hunting and sporting and kissing and merrymaking and endless delight from one day to the next.

Three months went by, and Hasan could no longer extend his visit. He missed his wife and two sons, one two years old and the other one year. He took his leave of each of the sisters, as he had before, and Rose wept and fainted from the agony of separation as she had before, and it was all highly satisfactory. They gave him five more camel-loads of gold and five more of silver and one of food for the trip and let him go, making him promise not to forget them so long next time. It was a promise he would keep.

Saddened but eager, he impelled his mount toward Baghdad. In due course he arrived, entered his house, and called for his family.

No one answered him. Alarmed, he searched from room to room, finding them all deserted. Finally he came upon his mother in the courtyard, kneeling before three graves and crying bitterly. Her body was worn and her bones were wasted; she was so miserable that she fainted when she saw him.

Hasan knew disaster was upon him. Mechanically he unloaded the camels and dismissed them, trying to calm his emotion. He went to the storage-closet and found the door open, the chest broken, and the feather-dress missing, and understood what his wife and children were gone. He tore his clothes and buffeted his face and threw himself to the floor like a madman; his head struck a tilé and he knew no more.

When he woke his mother was tending him. Rage overcame him; he bounded to his feet, lifted the giant scymitar he still wore from his journey, and advanced upon her. "Tell me the truth!" he roared. "What happened? How did my wife get hold of the feather-dress? Confess at once, or I'll strike off your head and then kill myself."

She recoiled in terror, knowing him mad enough to do what he threatened. "O my son, do not do such a horrible deed! Put away your sword and sit down, and I will tell you everything that passed while you were gone."

Hasan was suddenly shamed by his violence, knowing that his mother would never have betrayed him. He sheathed the blade and sat down beside her, listening to the story she told.

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Sana stayed quietly with Hasan's mother for two days after he left for Serendip, tending her sons and saying nothing. On the third day her manner changed.

"Glory be to God!" she exclaimed, and the expression of her mouth had little element of worship. "Have I lived with this man for three years and never had a bath?"

"O my daughter—I cannot take you to the Hammam, the public bath, for Hasan made me promise not to take you out in the city or expose you to any danger. But I will gladly draw water and heat it for you and wash your head in the bath we have here in the house."

Sana's eyes flared. If Hasan's mother had ever doubted the girl was of royal blood, she would have been instantly convinced by the queenly wrath that now appeared. "If you had spoken this way to one of the slave-girls, she would have pleaded ill-treatment before the magistrate and demanded to be sold on the open market!"

"But your husband said—"

"Men are foolishly jealous, especially husbands. You have to allow for their ignorance, because they are afraid that any woman who leaves the house will get into trouble. But women are not all alike and you, as a woman, know it. If a woman has a mind for trouble, no man has the power to keep her from her desire. She will do what she wants, and nothing restrains her except her reason and her religion." Then Sana wept and bemoaned her isolation and cursed her fate, until Hasan's mother was sorry for her and became convinced that there was nothing for it but to let her have her way.

She committed the affair to Allah and made ready perfumes, clean linen, and everything else they would need for the bath. Then she took Sana and her two little boys to the Hammam, since it was ladies' day there.

The Hammam comprised several apartments with mosaic pavements of black and white marble and fine red tile. The inner apartments were covered by domes, with small round windows to let in the light.

They entered the disrobing room and stripped off their clothes. No one looked at the lank old limbs of Hasan's mother, but all the women were amazed at Sana's beauty, and they gathered around and exclaimed in delight.

They left the little boys playing on the cushions of the benches and went on into the main baths. The chief room was an extensive oblong, with a central pool-area the shape of a cross. In its center was a robust fountain of hot water rising steamily from a marble base.

The heat was oppressive at first, but their bodies soon adapted to the pervasive atmosphere, and the hot vapor was very pleasant. Attendants massaged the women and brought them sweets to eat. Sana looked about with interest at the taps and boilers in the corners, while a maid carefully plaited her unbound hair.

Other women admired Sana's symmetry and grace. "Surely there is none like her in all the city!" they whispered. "And she has two children, too!" The women of Baghdad seldom retained their sprightly figures after childbearing;

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to be a mother was generally to be soon ugly.

Word of her loveliness spread beyond the Hammam, and before long more women were coming in to see for themselves. The bath became so crowded they could hardly get around.

"We'd better go," Hasan's mother whispered anxiously. "We're creating an unwholesome distraction."

Sana pretended not to hear her.

A slave-girl approached and studied Sana with particular attention. "Glory be to Allah for the fair forms He creates!" she said. Sana smiled complacently and ignored her.

At length they left the bath and returned to the outer chamber to dress. When the women saw the fine apparel Sana donned they were amazed all over again, for she became even more beautiful. The slave-girl followed.

Sana gathered in her sons and accompanied the old woman back to their house, much pleased with herself. But the slave-girl continued to follow them until she saw where they lived.

Then that slave-girl, who belonged to the palace of the Caliph (explained Hasan's mother angrily) returned to her mistress, the Lady Zubaydah, and kissed the ground between her hands. "O Tohfah," said the mistress, "why did you tarry so long in the Hammam?"

"O my lady, I have seen a marvel! Never have I witnessed anything like it before, and so I had to learn more about it because I knew you would be interested."

Zubaydah was the chief wife of Caliph Harun al-Rashid, and his cousin. This double relationship to him gave her enormous power. She was famed for her beauty, munificence, and cleverness. She wore the costliest fabrics in the empire and refused to eat from any platter which was not gold or at least fine silver. She was devious: only last year she had presented the Caliph a gift of ten exceedingly fair and pliant slave maidens, in order to distract him from a rival favorite in the court, and it was said that several of these were already anticipating royal offspring.

Everything that happened in Baghdad was Zubaydah's concern, particularly the influx of attractive women. Splendid palaces had been built in her name, and she was constantly heaped with honor—but she did not rely on beauty alone to maintain her favor with Harun and her power over him.

"And just what did you see, Tohfah?" Zubaydah asked her slave, interested.

"O my lady, I saw a damsel in the bath who had with her two little boys like moons, yet never eyes beheld the like of this woman! She is without peer in all the realm. By Allah, O my lady, if the Commander of the Faithful were to learn of her, he would surely slay her husband and take her for his own, for her like is not to be found among women!"

"Indeed?" Zubaydah's eyes narrowed. "What else did you learn?"

"I inquired who was her husband, and they told me he was called Hasan of Bassorah, a man of much wealth. I

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followed her and discovered that she lives in the house of the wazir that retired some years ago, the house that has a gate opening on the city and another on the river. Indeed, I fear lest the Prince of True Believers hear of her and break the law and slay her husband and make a laison of love with her!"

"You are repeating yourself," Zubaydah snapped, hardly pleased. "Now let me understand you clearly: you say this damsel is so beautiful that one look at her would captivate the Caliph himself?"

"Yes, O my lady."

"Then I shall have to take a look at her. And if she is not as you describe, I'll have my eunuch strike off your head."

The girl gazed at her appalled.

"O strumpet!" Zubaydah said. "There are three hundred and threescore slave-girls in the Caliph's harem, one for every day of the year, each a jewel unpriced and a filly unridden save by the Caliph—but not one of them would distract his attention from me for a moment, did I choose to claim his interest. Now you tell me this merchant I never heard of has a wife, not even a virgin, that—"

The girl groveled. "O my mistress, she is lovelier than any of them, than any woman in the world!"

"Than *any* woman?" Zubaydah repeated ominously. "Woe to you if that isn't true. You have just staked your life upon it, girl. Now get out of here and fetch me Masrur."

The slave scrambled away, terrified.

Masrur was the Caliph's eunuch, the most important and trusted slave in the dominion. He performed the most personal tasks for Harun, and was especially favored for executions.

Masrur kissed the ground before her. Zubaydah, despite her pretentions, was well aware that this was purely a matter of courtesy. The eunuch owed allegiance to no one but the Caliph—and if the Caliph were to order him to behead the leading lady of the realm, the slave would surely do it.

"Go to the old wazir's house, the one with the two gates, and bring me the damsel who resides there, as well as her two children and the old woman who lives with her. Waste no time."

"I hear and obey, my lady." Masrur didn't mind running errands for pretty women, when he wasn't otherwise occupied. Eunuchs were not sexless, and were capable of a good deal more than the ignorant supposed.

Masrur proceeded to Hasan's house and knocked on the door. "Who is there?" the old woman demanded before opening.

"Masrur, sword-bearer to the Commander of the Faithful."

At these words she was afraid to deny him admittance, and opened the door. He saluted her with a handsome salaam. "The Lady Zubaydah, daughter of Ja'afar bin Mansur and queen-spouse of the Caliph Harun al-Rashid, the fifth of the sons of Al-Abbas, paternal uncle of the Prophet—whom Allah bless and keep!—summons you to her presence, you and your son's wife and her children; for word has reached her of the damsel's beauty."

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Hasan's mother was alarmed. "O my lord Masrur, we are foreign to this city, and the girl's husband, my son, is abroad and far from home, and he has strictly charged me not to let her go out during his absence or let anyone see her." She took a breath. "I'm afraid if anything happened to her he would kill himself. I beseech you, O Masrur, do not ask us to do what we are forbidden."

"O my lady, if I knew there were anything to be afraid of, I would never make this demand. But the Lady Zubaydah only wants to see the damsel, to assure herself that she is as lovely as is claimed; after that you will be free to return. So do not protest and do not worry; I will bring you back safely myself."

"You are taking the lamb to the crocodile, who only wants to **look** at her!" the old woman muttered, but saw that she could not disobey this order. She resigned herself and hoped for some intervention from Allah while she made Sana ready.

They followed Masrur to the palace of the caliphate, where they were duly escorted into the presence of Zubaydah.

The Caliph's wife sat on a couch of ebony inlaid with gold and silver. To her right and left hung multiple necklaces of jewels, turning in the breeze from fans her slaves beat, and shining brilliantly. Ornate tapestries covered the walls, set with gems, and her own robe was so copiously worked with precious stones that it was impossible to single any one of them out.

Hasan's mother was highly impressed, but Sana acted as though such trappings were commonplace.

"Will you remove your veil, so that I may look upon your face?" Zubaydah requested politely enough. "There are no men here."

Sana removed her veil and allowed the queen to look upon her features. Immediately the ladies of the court gave a great sigh, put to shame by the light of her countenance, which was brighter than the moon and fairer than a day in spring. Zubaydah and all her company stared at Sana without uttering a word.

Finally the queen arose and brought Sana to her couch, embracing her and seating the visitor beside herself. She called for a rich robe and took down the most splendid necklace for the guest. If there was malice in her mind, no trace of it showed in her attitude. "O liege lady of fair ones, you astound me and amaze my eyes. Surely Allah created you to give his followers a foretaste of paradise! Do you have any special skills?"

"O my lady, I have a dress of feathers of unearthly handiwork. If I could place it before you, you would see something marvelous indeed, and all who witnessed it would talk of its wonder until the day they died."

"By all means. Where is this dress of yours?"

"My husband's mother has it. Ask her for it."

Zubaydah summoned the old woman, who had overheard only a trace of this conversation. "O my lady the pilgrimess," she said, using the honorable address for aged females, "O my mother, go and fetch us the feather-dress, that we may appreciate the marvel she

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promises."

Hasan's mother saw that all was lost, but she did her best. "O my Lady, this foolish damsel is mistaken. Who ever heard of a dress made of feathers? Only birds possess such things!"

"She has it," Sana insisted. "She keeps it in a chest buried in a storage closet in the back of the house."

Zubaydah took from her neck a chain of jewels worth the treasure of an empire. "I conjure you, O my mother, accept this necklace and bring the dress to us. Afterwards you may take back the dress but keep the necklace."

"I never saw such a dress! I don't know what she's talking about!"

Zubaydah's patience, never extensive, puffed away. "Masrur!" she called, and the giant eunuch strode into the hall. "Take this hag's keys and go back to the house. Inside you'll find a storage closet, near the back. Open it and see if there is a chest therein. Take it out and break it open and bring me what you find within it."

Masrur took the keys and departed. Despairingly, the old woman followed, weeping and moaning with regret that she had ever listened to Sana. The crafty maiden's clamor for a bath had been nothing more than a trick leading to this! She watched the slave locate the feather-suit and wrap it carefully in a napkin and carry it to Zubaydah, who took it out and turned it over in her hands. She marveled at the beauty of its structure and the cleverness of its workmanship.

Zubaydah passed it to Sana. "Is this the garment of which you spoke?"

"Yes, O my lady!" She took it at once, joyfully. She examined it in detail and rejoiced to find that it was exactly as it had been before, whole and without a feather missing.

Sana wrapped herself in the suit and lo! she became a spectacular bird. "Glory be to Allah, to whom belong all might and all majesty!" Zubaydah exclaimed, and all present were wonderstruck.

Sana walked up and down the hall with a graceful and swaying gait, looking so much like a bird that no one who had not seen the transformation would have recognized her as human. She danced and sported and spread her fair white wings so that every feather stood out, making patterns like enormous fans.

"What do you think of that, my ladies?" she inquired, and her bill moved in the talking and her voice was the chirp of a bird.

"We have never witnessed such a thing!" they replied.

"What I am about to do is better yet!" And now she spread her wings and flapped them strongly and rose from the floor, flying toward the queen in a great swoop, while everyone stared in disbelief.

"And even more," she chortled grandly. She stood up, opened her suit so that she became half-woman again, and picked up her two sons. Nasir and Mansur clung to her, and she folded them to her bosom and closed the suit over them. She spread her wings and flew up into the high dome of the palace, where she perched on the sill of an open vent.

"What a rare exhibition!" Zubaydah said. "Come down now and return to your lovely human shape, and we shall celebrate this incredible

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occasion."

"Far be it from me to return!" Sana cried, her voice now a cackle. "I will not give up my freedom so easily, now that I have recovered it. I'm going home!"

"O my daughter!" Hasan's mother cried. "How can you desert Hasan, who loves you with all his heart and who will die wretchedly if he loses you?"

Sana paused. "O mother of my husband," she chirped, "indeed it irks me to part from you, for your heart is good; but your son surprised me in my innocence and captured me by force, and there was nothing I could do but yield myself to him after he had seen my shame and deprived me of my freedom. Moreover he is not my husband, for I am not a Moslem, nor do my people recognize your marriage-customs. But if your son grows lonely and desires to see me again, let him come to me in the Isles of Wak!"

With that she took flight and disappeared from their view, while the old woman wept and beat her face and swooned away from misery.

Zubaydah caught her up and led her to the couch. "O my lady," the old woman cried, "what have you done!"

"O my lady the pilgrimess, I did not dream this would happen," Zubaydah replied. Somehow she didn't sound as miserable as she might. Certainly *she* had no problem remaining. The Caliph would never see the bird-maiden now. "If you had told me everything and warned me of her powers, I would never have given her the feather-dress. I did not know she was of the flying jinn. But what good are words? I intended no evil; please forgive me for the injury I have done you."

There was nothing the old woman could do except to answer shortly "I forgive you!" and go home.

And at home she fasted in sorrow and spent her days in misery, pining for her lost daughter-in-law and grandchildren. She cursed the queen and cursed herself more, afraid of what would happen when Hasan returned. She dug three graves in the courtyard to represent the lost members of the household and spent her days and nights in a mournful watch, unable to assuage her grief.

To be concluded

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The end justifies the means . . . sometimes. But who is to be the judge? And who can foresee the terrible effect of those means upon the end? Wherein lies the—

MORALITY

THOMAS N. SCORTIA

Illustrated by BRUCE JONES

At midnight he felt the King enter his quarters and tread the long tortuous halls until he appeared in the inner chamber, his eyes glazed from too much wine.

"Monster," the King said, "tell me new secrets that I may extend my sway over the distant lands across the sea."

Glat, who was five hundred earth years old and just at the peak of his maturity by the standards of his race, shook his great head.

"You have too much power already."

The King flushed in anger and slapped his hand on his chest. His intricately curled beard looked wilted in the torch light. "I saved your life the day the dogs came upon you and you live only because it suits my pleasure."

"That's partly true," Glat said.

"I can summon my guard and put an end to your monsterous life," the King said. "Even your strength is nothing against the two-headed ax."

"You can end my life," Glat said, "but with it you end your power."

"My armies..." the King began.

"...are as nothing without the power of fear which you have built around me," Glat said.

"I should have killed you on the day you came out of the sky," the King said.

"And you would have lived out your life as a petty princeling, besieged by all your neighbors and vassals," Glat said.

"Without the food I provide you would die."

"Without the knowledge and the fear I provide," Glat said, "they would fall upon you and tear you to pieces. They would put the torch to your palace and the molten silver would run like water through your halls."

The King shook his head drunkenly. "I am cursed by the gods for ever allowing a blasphemy like you to live."

"I am hungry," Glat said.

"You know your food comes tomorrow," the King said. "Gods, that I should have to feed such a thing as you."

"That I should have to bring power to such a thing as you," Glat said and turned his great-thewed back on the King.

After awhile he sensed that he was alone and his mind followed the drink-fuzzed mind of the King down the long winding corridors to the great cypress doors with their massive bronze hinges. Glat sighed and squatted on the floor thinking sad thoughts of his world and all the many millions whose lives waited on his return.

He could feel the guards at the entrance of his stone building shifting uneasily in the night. Their thoughts were dull and

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sodden, but overlaying these were the sharp patterns of fear and awe. They did not think of him as a god but certainly as one close to the gods. His very appearance would have paralyzed them with fear and horror. The mere thought of his existence somewhere within the primitive pile of dank stone was enough to drive all drowsiness or thought of sleep from their minds.

Glat hunched his great hairy shoulders in a human gesture and shivered at the cold oozing through the damp stone walls. His own world was warmer and his race built with light metal mesh and fabric walls. The use of stone had been new to him until the last century when he and the survey teams had gone forth in the desperate search to find the solution to their great danger.

Irony! That a race so technologically advanced as his could predict the existance of a complex molecule but not be able to build it. To know that somewhere in the universe must exist the specific biological that would save them from extinction and not be able to synthesize the drug.

But now he had it. On the fourth planet of this system he had found the lichen-like plant whose major protein was the substance that would halt the plague that meant the slow but inevitable slaughter of his people.

They would live if he could stay alive. If he could be rescued. If he could find the food he needed to keep the precious knowledge alive until ...

He shuddered, remembering food and all that it meant. The thought of food and of the King's hold on him made him ill. There was only one way to expiate his part in this madness that a petty barbarian princeling had forced upon him. In the centuries of conditioning he knew there

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was only one truly moral answer: He would live; and, because he must live, he would eat. And when the knowledge his brain held was known to his race, he would die.

As would the King.

Because he slept very little compared with the creatures of this planet he was awake most of their night. The festival had begun in the city and throughout the night groups of men and women roved through the town singing and carousing. At one point he went to the portico of which only he and the King knew. (The workmen were long since dead and the architect who had designed this great heap of stone was either dead or imprisoned.) Outside the night was a soft haze of light from the full moon, and the aromatic bushes before the portico filled the air with what was to Glat an almost intoxicating scent.

Below in the streets torches flared and were extinguished. The discordant sounds of singing drifted up to him, and once above the distant noise he heard the clear note of a woman's scream. It was not repeated. He sent his mind searching for the source but without success. Whoever the being was who had screamed, she existed no longer.

He sighed a very human sigh and turned away. It was sad, this casual way they had of dealing with something so precious as life. They extinguished it in each other without more than a passing thought.

Was he so much better? he thought. He needed the food to live, but the memory of all those minds draining into the night to feed him, to keep his single being alive—his own people would call him monster, just as did the people in the city below.

Only he had to stay alive. Had to. ***Had to.*** Or everything was over, the end of his race and all that they had built, all of the greatness they had carried to the stars. After he was rescued and had handed over the precious knowledge he could afford to die. Until then he did what he must to stay alive.

He went to the chamber where the lone survivor remained from the festival last month. When he entered the chamber, she screamed once. With a terrible sickness clouding his mind, he crushed her life force and opened her veins.

After that, he ate.

The ship came at dawn, its prow cutting through the morning mists that steamed from the harbor waters. Bright bunting streamed from its mast and bouquets of flowers festooned the oar-banks. The single triangular sail was blood red with the symbol of the Goddess embroidered in bright gold across its face.

Glat watched from the portico as it drifted gracefully into the harbor and anchored at the lacquered pole by the dock. Ranks of warriors stood waiting, the morning sun gleaming on the honed edges of their double-headed axes. In spite of the long night's revelries the people were about, pushing the crowds against the restraining ranks of the soldiers.

He saw the line of passengers disembarking, their tunics shining with the whiteness that was a symbol of purity in the coming rites. They were all very young and very frightened. One of the girls was weeping. A brawny youth with thick peasant features led the way from the ship, his dull eyes staring insolently at the soldiers. When the captain of the detail stepped forward and laid his hand on the youth's shoulders, he brushed the hand aside and spat at the officer. For an instant, Glat thought the captain might take a sword to the youth, but he mastered himself at the last moment and gave the

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youth a push. Several of the soldiers broke ranks and grabbed the boy before he could return to the attack. After a brief struggle, they bore him away.

Briefly Glat touched minds with the boy, wondering at the show of resistence when the captives were usually so docile. The hot fury in the boy's mind shook him, even though he was accustomed to the raw passions of these people. He retreated bearing a brief impression of animal cunning and a mind dull and primitive in its bloodlust. Glat returned to his inner chamber and washed himself with the water remaining in his urn. He felt soiled physically after the contact with the boy's mind.

During the early hours of the morning he sat in his inner chamber, his metabolism at low ebb as he directed all of his energies outward, searching. Each morning for ten years he had done this, searching as far as his mind could reach for some sign of his own kind. With a communicator he might have spanned the distance to the nearest star, but that had been lost the day his ship plunged through the atmosphere with crippled generators and crashed in the forest to the south. He had barely made it from the ship before the overloaded generators spilled their stored energy and reduced the ship to a molten blob of metals and foreign plastics.

It was in the forest that he first became aware of the aliens with their subtle cruel minds and the baser blood lust of the creatures with them. The lesser creatures had picked up his scent and bayed and barked at the strangeness of it. He might have eluded them but for his injuries. When the King's hunting party had burst into the clearing where he stood near unconsciousness, the dogs pulled him down in seconds. It was the King who called them off, his barbarian mind assessing the situation in an instant. They bound him and carried him through the back streets of the town to the palace where he was caged and chunks of bloody meat shoved into his cage. When he would not eat, they tried hay and straw and raw fish and all manner of fruits.

The King's wife and daughter both came separately to marvel at him. Glat found their minds as cruel and primitive as the King's. Their only reaction was disgust and fear and the sudden desire that the King have him killed. Only the fear that he was something sent by the gods to test them kept the King from this; and in the weeks of weakening strength and growing hunger Glat finally managed to learn the King's language and tell him his need.

By that time he knew that there was only one food which would sustain him. The thought was sickening to him, but not to the King. In the most casual way, the King gave him one of the young soldiers guarding him, and in return Glat gave the King the help he required.

Weapons Glat would not give him, but the techniques for hardening the bronze edges of weapons and the strategy that defeated the outlying islands in a month was the price Glad paid for his food. Too late he realized he was paying another price: The superstitious terror his presence invoked in the natives. The terror alone destroyed the King's enemies where mere arms would have failed; and with each victory Glat was assured of more food.

In the five years following, the King extended the power of his petty island kingdom, and Glat became the accursed thing of the gods that lurked in the great pile of stone on the hill and on festival day took the young ones of the captive provinces each month for food.

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At noon Glat sighed and returned his life force to his heavy thewed limbs which had grown cold and bloodless from his effort. It was no use. If there were any of his race in the area, they were beyond the range of his thoughts. In a day they might travel light years and be within range and out of it again; but he could not drain his energies indefinitely. For this reason he searched only during the morning hours, hoping that, should they come to this system, they would stay for at least a day.

The King's daughter, who was high priestess of the Goddess, came with the King's chamberlain before long and brought him fresh water. The King would trust no others to see him.

"Tomorrow noon is the end of the festival," she said.

"I know," he said. In the decade past he had learned to read their expressions as well as their minds, and her look of cold distain was as clear as the disgust that filled her mind. She would as soon poison his water as kill one of the lambs she sacrificed daily on her Goddess's altar.

After he had slaked his thirst she told the chamberlain, "Leave us."

"But your father..."

"Leave us," she said. "The monster knows better than to harm me."

The chamberlain bowed and retired.

"There is something I wish to discuss with you," she said.

"I was already aware of that," Glat said. When she looked at him in a puzzled manner, he said it again, articulating more carefully.

"You speak like a barbarian," she said coldly.

"My lips were not made for your speech," he said tiredly.

"I have often wondered what hell birthed you," she said.

"Your father has an answer to that," he said.

She shuddered. "My poor mother," she said. He noted that her mind was quite without the feeling she pretended. Her mother was nothing but a pallid thing the King kept in his chambers, and she had grown up without the least concern for the woman.

"The hell that birthed me," he said slowly, "was a gentle world compared to this one. You would not understand my people."

"Monsters," she said.

"You have known me for years," he said softly. "Am I truly a monster?" For some reason he felt the need to talk with her, to get past the bleak surface of her mind.

"I have come to ask a favor," he said.

"You haven't answered my question," he said.

"There's no need for an answer," she said. "I am not in awe of you like the vermin that infest the city out there. You're as much the child of the gods as I am, which is to say not at all."

"Yet I am completely different from anything you have ever seen."

"That I'm sure of," she said, "but you can be killed. I remember your burns when they brought you to the palace and the way your blood ran from the wound on your chest."

"It was a trivial thing," he said.

"It would have killed a man," she said. "It would have cut into his heart and killed him in an instant."

"It was too high," he said. "Besides, I don't have a heart as you understand the term but a number of separate chambers throughout the body, and such a wound could not kill me."

"Are you immortal?" she asked in wonder.

"No," he said, "but the wound was

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several hands too high to be fatal."

"No matter," she said, her face flushed. "You are more valuable alive than dead."

"You wanted a favor," he said.

"There is someone in the new group from the vassal states. I do not wish him killed."

"I have no control over that," he said.

"If you kill him," she said, "I will put an end to you. In some fashion, I will find a way to put an end to you."

"I need food," he said.

"Oh, that," she said distainfully. "I will give you one of my temple girls. There is one quite pretty who annoys me. She will do well enough."

"And you call me 'monster,'" he said.

She looked puzzled. "She's only a captain's daughter. Why should it matter?"

"I can see that it doesn't," Glat said.

"There is a young man who came in the ship this morning. I do not wish him harmed."

"Which one?" Glat sighed.

She spoke at length describing the man, and Glat recognized him as the boy who had caused the trouble with the soldiers that morning.

"Why him?" he asked.

"I find him desireable."

"He's like some animal," Glat said. "I have been in his mind and he is dangerous."

"Not to me," she said proudly.

"To everyone," he said.

"You will not kill him," she ordered.

"Very well," he said.

"I have a use for him," she said.

"As you wish," Glat said.

After the King's daughter had left, he went to the portico and watched the afternoon games. After the races and the contests of strength, they played the games that always sickened him, but he watched with an ill fascination. The animals were brought forth from their pens, and the youths who had come from the ship and had contended in the games baited them, driving the creatures into a fury.

He marveled at the agility of the youths. They seemed to be everywhere, tormenting the creatures, jabbing at them with spears and leaping back from their maddened charges. The youth whom the King's daughter favored was one of these and he was particularly agile, in several instances actually vaulting over the animal's back as it charged. Several of the others tried but none were as clever as he. Once Glat reached out to touch his mind and marveled at the complete lack of fear in the dull thought processes. Was he so stupid that he did not understand his own danger?

No, it was the excitement and the bloodlust. Always the bloodlust. In the end, they killed the animals and the people feasted on their flesh. Glat withdrew his mind, sickened and shaking. He sat in the inner chamber throughout the night, deafening his ears to the celebrations in the town below.

In the morning they gathered below and the youths from the ship, freshly scraped and perfumed were led out, their foreheads bound with wool fillets. The endless rites of purification stretched through the morning as Glat sat in his chambers vainly searching.

His mind was tired and he dreaded the evening when the youths would enter his precincts. The dank stone felt hard against his back as the warmth left his legs and he quested outward, searching. Everywhere his mind searched there was only the cold blankness of space and the cold worlds outward from the sun. He felt vistas of ice and frozen methane and

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poisonous vapors that drifted through alien skies under blue-black clouds. Near the sun, heat seared parched plains and metals ran molten in cascading streams down heat-cracked cliffs. Everywhere there was only sterile rock and no sign of life.

In the third hour of his vigil as he grew tired, he caught the first thin traceries of thought.

Just the wisp of a feeling of identity, the touch of awareness that said, *"I am I."*

"Help!" he shouted silently.

"I am I."

"Help!"

"What?"

"What was that?" said another thought.

"Too far away."

"Where?"

"Here," Glat shouted.

"There," someone thought.

"Closer, get closer," said another thought.

In that instant his thoughts collapsed from fatigue and Glat felt the coldness creeping up his legs. The distance was too far, well outside the system. He had weakened himself too much and they were too far away. Had he shown them the way? Perhaps, he thought, perhaps this was the day he had waited for and dreaded. Perhaps today they would come and he could tell them. And they would finally see what he had done to stay alive.

He shuddered.

By evening he felt his strength returning. He sat and sent his attention outward to the crowds that gathered below. The priests were forming at the head of the procession and behind them the guards surrounding the group of youths. They started up the hill and he felt the wavering of fear from the group that must enter the building. All except one. There was the feeling of insolence and ... danger.

He waited in the inner chamber feeling the gnawing hunger. He had not eaten in two days, and the physical weakness invaded his nervous system, weakening his thoughts. He must have food soon or his weakness would dull any chance of contacting those minds.

It would take the group over an hour to penetrate the intricate corridors to the point where he might take them. He sat, draining his energies, searching for the minds of his people.

"There," came the thought.

"I am here," he cried.

"Yes," the thought said. *"Very faint."*

"Weak," he replied.

"Coming closer."

"I have the answer."

"Closer."

He needed food. His thoughts had become too weak. He rose and shook his shaggy head. Then he left his chamber and proceeded along the corridors, searching for his food. His mind found them in the west wing and he plodded slowly toward them, feeling the wash of fear...

And of hate ... and confidence ... of sure confidence in the weight in his hand.

Weight? He had a weapon. Suddenly Glat realized one of them had a weapon. How had it happened? They had never carried weapons before. No matter, he thought. They cannot kill me and I must have food.

When he rounded the corner two of the girls screamed. He stood, feeling the waves of fear bathe him. Fear from all of them except the youth with the black hair and hate-filled eyes. He was carrying a sword and something else...

"Here," the thought came. *"Where are you?"*

"Here," his mind cried.

"We feel you."

(Continued on page 136)

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Suppose—just suppose—that you were offered the opportunity to play God with your past life . . .

WOULD YOU?

JAMES H. SCHMITZ

After dinner Markus Menzies suggested he might show Geoffrey about the chalet. Geoffrey agreed. The place had belonged previously to some Liechtenstein, and Marcus had bought it five years ago. What a man like Menzies could want with an expensive antique in the heart of the Alps Geoffrey couldn't imagine. It wasn't the proximity of the ski slopes which had drawn Geoffrey into the area for the season. Markus always had looked on sporting activities involving physical exertion or risk as an occupation for lunatics. And he was an old man now. Though, Geoffrey reminded himself, only fifteen years his senior.

And what, for that matter, had induced Markus to invite him here for dinner tonight? It had been eight years since they last met, considerably longer than that since they'd had any significant dealings with each other. There'd been a time, of course, when Markus Menzies and Geoffrey Bryant had made a great team... in aircraft, in textiles, in shipping, in one thing and another, legitimate for the most part, occasionally not quite so legitimate. They'd both made their pile in the process; and then they'd split up. Markus went on to become extremely wealthy; Geoffrey remained as wealthy as he wanted to be or saw any use in being. It made sense to start to enjoy what he had rather than continue maneuvering for more. He wasn't married, had no intention of getting married, had no dependents of any kind. The world waited to be savored at leisure.

He'd accepted the telephoned invitation to dinner mainly out of curiosity. Markus wasn't prone to nostalgic sentimentality; he should have something in mind, and it might be interesting to find out what it was. But nothing was said over dinner to give Geoffrey a definite clue. The talk ranged widely but comfortably. Markus had acquired a variety of hobbies; the chalet might be one of them. He seemed completely relaxed, which meant nothing. If he had a purpose, it would show when he intended it to show, not before.

"I had quite a start the other day," he was remarking. "I was coming through the village, and there was a tall slender woman who ... well, for an instant I actually believed I was looking, over a space of not more than twenty feet, at Eileen Howard."

After a moment Geoffrey said soberly, "I've made similar mistakes more than once."

Markus glanced across the table at him. Briefly his face looked worn and tired, more so than his age indicated. "Not at all like seeing a ghost," he said, as if to himself. "A compellingly vivid

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impression of Eileen as she was then. All life, warmth!" He shook his head. "Immediately afterwards, I was unable to understand what could have given me the idea. There was some general resemblance, of course." His voice trailed off.

Something in a motion or gesture could be enough, Geoffrey thought. The glimpse of a finely drawn profile, the inflection in a laugh. It hadn't happened to him in some time. They'd both wanted Eileen; probably they'd both loved her. And because of that, between them in their maneuverings, they shared in a way the responsibility for her accidental death. They'd never talked about it, rarely mentioned Eileen again. But the other's presence soon became a growing irritation. It was a relief when their informal partnership ended.

It might have been simply that chance incident in the village which caused Markus to extend his invitation, some sudden urge to speak of Eileen. But he did not seem to want to pursue the subject farther. Geoffrey was glad of it.

The talk shifted to impersonal things. It was after the brandy that Markus suggested a tour of the chalet. For a while they moved unhurriedly about the big hall downstairs, along corridors, in and out of rooms. Markus had taken the house with its furnishings and left most of those untouched. Landscapes and portraits shared the walls with formidably antlered and horned heads. Markus kept up a line of talk about the chalet's history and the affairs of previous owners. Geoffrey found himself getting bored.

"Where's the mysterious chair you mentioned?" he asked.

Markus nodded towards the stairway. "Upstairs." He smiled. "I was saving it for the last. Would you like to see it now?"

Geoffrey said he would, hoping that would end the tour. He followed his host up a narrow flight of stairs to the third floor of the chalet. Markus stopped before a door, took out a key. Geoffrey looked at him curiously. "You keep the room locked?"

"Some of the servants know the story," Markus said. "They have a superstitious feeling about the chair. I think they're a little afraid of it. So the room remains locked mainly for their peace of mind." He opened the door, switched on overhead lights. "There it is."

The room was not large and the chair dominated it. It stood on a low dais, evidently constructed for the purpose. A sizable chair of smoothly polished wood, rather heavily built but in lines of flowing grace. The carvings were restrained, barely more than indicated, except for an animal head at the end of each broad armrest. The heads lifted out from the chair, pointing into the room. They were oblong and flattened, somewhat like the heads of lizards or snakes.

Well, it's a chair, Geoffrey thought. He realized Markus was watching him. "Markus," he said, "do you expect me to be impressed?"

Markus smiled. "Why not? You're looking at a mystery. Do you recognize the period?"

Geoffrey shook his head. "Period furniture isn't one of my interests."

"The chair is at least two hundred years old," Markus said. "Records show it was acquired that long ago. They don't show from whom it was acquired. But it belongs to no definable period."

He moved towards the chair, Geoffrey following him. "What would you call that wood?" Markus asked.

Geoffrey shrugged. "Oak, possibly."

Markus stroked a finger along the

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armrest. "Touch it," he suggested.

Geoffrey laid the palm of his hand on the chair, moved it tentatively back and forth, frowned and pressed down with his fingers.

"That's very odd!" he said.

"What impression do you get?"

"A smoothness, almost like velvet. Not only that, I had the feeling it was soft, that it was giving a little under my touch. But it obviously is quite solid."

He drew his hand away, looked at Markus with increased interest. "What was that story again? That anyone who sits in this chair can change his past life?"

"That's it. One sits in the chair. One places his hands"—Markus nodded at the armrests—"on those carved heads—"

"—and makes a wish, eh?" Geoffrey concluded.

"No. Not a wish. One is then able, quite literally, to edit the events in his past. Say you made a wrong decision twenty years ago. You can now undo that mistake, and remake the decision. Lost opportunities can be regained, and your life up to the present will have been changed correspondingly. Anything can be changed. Anything! That's the story."

Geoffrey smiled uncomfortably. "You sound almost as if you believed it!"

"Perhaps I do."

Now this was getting eerie. Geoffrey stared at his host. Had Markus gone out of his mind? "You've tried it?" he asked.

"Should I want to change my life? I have my health, my hobbies, my money."

"Isn't there anything you'd like to have done differently?"

Markus said slowly, "I'm not sure there is."

"How did the people who are supposed to have used the chair make out?" Geoffrey asked, smiling to indicate he wasn't taking this seriously.

Markus shook his head. "Whoever has tried it evidently preferred not to put the fact on record. Would you?"

"Probably not." Geoffrey laughed. "Well, it's a good story, Markus. And perhaps I'm a little sorry it isn't true. Because there might be things in my life I would prefer to be otherwise. That wood—it must be wood—is certainly odd! I can't imagine what kind of treatment was given it to produce that effect."

"Put your hand on one of the reptile heads," Markus said.

Geoffrey looked at him, then cupped his palm over the carved head nearest him. "Now what?" he asked.

"Leave it there a moment."

Geoffrey shrugged mentally, let his hand rest on the wood. After some seconds his expression changed. Perhaps a minute later, he removed his hand. "This is very curious!" he remarked.

"What did you experience?" Markus asked.

"Something like a current of energy. It built up gradually, then held at a steady level. Almost electric. But not at all unpleasant. I gather you've felt it."

"Yes, I've felt it."

"While I was sensing this," Geoffrey said, "I found myself beginning to believe that I *could* change the past. If I wanted to."

"If you'd like to experiment," Markus told him, "the chair is yours."

"How does it work?"

"The way it's been described," said Markus, "you will be in contact with your past as long as you are seated in the chair and keep your hands on the carved heads. You'll begin to remember past events in all detail and find yourself a part of them again. And if you wish to change them then, turn them into something other than you recall as having happened, you'll be

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able to do it. When you're ready to stop the process, simply lift your hands from the heads. That's all there is to it...."

So Geoffrey sat in the chair. He gave Markus, standing near the center of the room, watching him, a final probing glance. Then he clasped his hands firmly about the snakelike or lizardlike heads.

For a few seconds there was nothing. Then came the sense of flowing power, faint and far away, but growing stronger as if he were being drawn towards it, until it seemed all about him and streaming through him.

Like a great recording tape unreeling in all his senses, the past burst in.

It was a swift blur of impressions at first. Glimpses of color and motion, the ghostly murmuring of voices, flicks of smell and taste, a sense of shifting physically, a jerking in the muscles. It all rushed past him, or he was rushing, being rushed, through it. There remained some awareness of the room dimly about, of the motionless shadowy shape of Markus Menzies. Emotions began to wash through Geoffrey, a hurrying tide of anxieties, grief, furious anger, high delight, changing from moment to moment....

And then, somewhere in darkness, it all stopped. As if he'd touched a button or switch on a machine, bringing it to a standstill. The awareness arose that he could control this.

At that point he was caught midway between apprehension—because of the strangeness of the experience—and fascinated interest. Something in him kept insisting that his sensations had been simply sensations, without further significance. That the chair, whatever strange machine the chair might be, was stirring up memories and drawing on them to produce such effects, and that there was nothing else to it, no preternatural connection at all with the realities of the past. But there was also the growing sense of power, of amost godlike power, and of being in control of what occurred here.

So all right, he thought, let's try it out. Let's select some occasion when something went wrong, some very minor thing for a start, and see if I can edit out the mistakes I made.

And he found such an occasion.

And then another, and another—

Until presently he discovered he was sitting in the chair again. His hands were still closed on the carved heads, but the feeling of the flow of power was gone. Markus Menzies stood staring at him, his face set and tense.

Geoffrey pushed himself rather stiffly to his feet and stepped down from the dais.

"Well?" Markus said harshly. "What happened?"

Geoffrey shook his head. "Oh, I was back there all right," he said. "At least, that was my impression." He smiled carefully. "This is some kind of trickery, I think, Markus. But very clever trickery."

"It's no trick, you fool! Did you change anything?"

"No, I didn't change anything. Though I admit I was tempted. Oh, yes! Strongly tempted—" To Geoffrey's surprise, his voice shook for an instant. "In particular," he went on, "in that series of events which ended, as you recall, in Eileen's death."

Markus's face was white now. "You were ***there***—and you did nothing?"

"I changed nothing," Geoffrey said irritably. "I felt I could do it. I believe now that feeling was part of the deception. But if it wasn't deception, if it would have been possible, then I think I was wise not

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to make the attempt."

"You wouldn't save Eileen?"

"Markus, Eileen is dead. Quite dead. How could she be made alive again? And assuming she still were alive, had never died, the recent years would not have been at all what they were. That was a consideration. I realized during this that I've been very fortunate. The decisions I made, right and wrong, brought me safely to this point in life and into not unfavorable circumstances. In retrospect I know now that the odds were against that, though day by day, as I lived it, I never was fully conscious of them. Think of the countless opportunities each of us is given to turn unawares into the wrong path, the less satisfactory path, even the fatal path ... no, I don't care to gamble deliberately against those odds, to place what I am and have now at stake again. And if I had acted in any way, that's what I would have done. To force change on the past, even in one minor aspect, might alter all the subsequent past in unforeseeable ways. That very well could be disastrous."

Markus said, with intense bitterness, "You're a coward!"

"Aren't you?" Geoffrey asked.

"Yes, I am," Markus said. "I once sat in that chair as you have done."

"I was sure you had," Geoffrey said. "And I don't blame you entirely for trying to get me to do something for which you didn't have the courage. But to do it was quite out of the question. Perhaps I might have modified the past without affecting the present external world in any noticeable way. Even that would have brought an element of intolerable uncertainty into my personal existence. As things are, I believe I understand the world and its realities well enough. My life has been based on the feeling of understanding it and being able to deal with it. I want to retain the feeling. And I would have lost it if I had attempted to change the past and succeeded. If I knew that was possible, I could never be sure of the reality of anything about me again. The world would have become as insubstantial and meaningless as a madman's dream.

"I don't want that. I couldn't live that way. So I won't put your device to the test. If I haven't proved that it can do what it is supposed to do, I can continue to believe that it's impossible. I prefer to believe it." He added, after a moment, "And so, I think, do you."

Markus shrugged heavily. "Did you have the feeling that this was the one opportunity you would be given—that if you didn't change the past now, you wouldn't have another chance?"

"Yes, I had that feeling," Gregory said. "It was part of the temptation." He looked over at the dais, and his gaze stayed for a moment on the carved animalic heads lifting silently into the room. "It doesn't matter," he said, "whether it was a valid feeling or not. Because nothing would induce me to sit in that chair again."

He started out of the room. Markus followed and locked the door behind them. As they went down the stairs, Geoffrey said, "I imagine that was your purpose in inviting me here tonight."

"Of course it was," Markus said.

"When did you have the experience?"

"Shortly after I bought this place. Almost five years ago."

"Have you ever tried to repeat it?"

Markus shook his head.

—James H. Schmitz

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There's always a wiseacre in every crowd, and every old pro has his ways of dealing with them . . .

MAGIC SHOW

ALAN E. NOURSE

Ma.gi'cian (ma.jish'.an), N. (F. *magicien*, fr. L. *magicus*. See MAGIC, adj.) One skilled in magic; one who practices the black art; an enchanger, necromancer, sorcerer, conjuror...

Webster's Unabridged Dictionary of the English Language, 3rd Ed.

We were walking down the Midway of this little Carny when Denny tugged on my sleeve. "Hey!" he said. "There's a magic show! Let's go over and give them a hard time."

I personally had been thinking of the burlesque down at the far end of the Midway. This Carny was a little fly-by-night outfit. I figured it might not be around tomorrow, what with the blue-laws in this berg, and I hadn't seen a good burly in months. "Come on," I said to Denny. "You don't want to see any magic show. You don't like 'em, anyway. You'll just go in and shoot off your big mouth and get bounced again like the last time."

Denny pulled his long face at me. "Whaddayamean, get bounced? The guy was a faker," he said. "And anyway, I thought *you* were the guy that liked magic shows. Alanaldo the Great and his Thimble Thaumaturgy. Come on, maybe you'll learn something new. And anyway, look at that sign! This guy's asking for it."

Now magicians as a crowd are not noted for their modesty. I know ... I've been playing around with parlor magic for years, little private shows now and then, and some of the conceit I've run into in the game you wouldn't believe if I told you. But this buy, I thought, was overdoing it a bit. The sign covered half the tent with red and yellow and black, and it said:

THE GREAT NICOLLETTI

!!! MASTER MAGICIAN OF
THE UNIVERSE !!!
Staggering Feats of Legerdemain
Performed Before Your Very Eyes!
Unbelievable!! Amazing!!
Defies Imagination!!
You Must See Him to Believe It!!!

The bite was fifty cents, and the barker was dragging them in by the heels. We pushed through the crowd. Denny is not exactly God's gift to the ladies, but he managed to squeeze us into the front row beside two of the county's most gorgeous babes, and then broke the ice with a bag of popcorn, and leaned back with the sneer he reserves especially for Carny magicians. You'd think this was his hobby, or something.

I wasn't counting on too much for fifty cents. There was a lot of noise backstage, and then a tinny record started playing a fanfare, and the curtains parted, tinsel and all, and the Great Nicolletti appeared. Not in a flash of orange smoke, unfortunately. He just walked onstage from the wings, and gave us a toothy grin, and then started in with the usual corny patter and fiddle-faddle they use in the

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trade to hook the audience. He was a tall, skinny guy, with slick black hair under his topper, and a kind of hangdog look on his face. Seedy looking tux ... probably a wino, I figured. Denny started right off with *sotto voce* cracks about three creases in each pantleg, and had the girlies giggling in no time.

On the stage the guy's routine seemed to be hit 'em with color for an opener ... he dragged multitudes of colored silks out of an eggshell and tossed them around; then he released all the doves that he could carry under his coat, and a few dozen more to boot. He slipped the big gold and black cloak off his shoulders, and flapped it around until the dust flew, and then from its depths produced his little black stand, complete with fishbowl and guppies, a crystal ball and a wand, and another thousand or so silks. And then he bowed as though he'd really pulled off something wonderful, and moved back for act two.

The audience sat on its hands. All except Denny. He stomped and cheered, and clapped his hands, and shouted, "More, more!" until the guy turned a frosty smile on him. Denny was having a fine time. The girls thought he was great.

The routine was strictly old stuff to me. I'd seen the same lineup at a thousand magic shows. He did the old Wine and Water switch, and then he did a Nest of Boxes ... used a watch from the audience, and I couldn't even spot the plant ... and followed it up with a very gaudy Chain-of-Silks. Pretty soon he brought out his Linking Rings, and tossed a couple out to the audience for inspection, and then ran through a couple of ordinary routines with them. He broke out some Giant Cards and did a double-ace routine that he'd lifted straight from Cardini without the courtesy of modification And all this he did through a running stream of heckling from my friend, who seemed determined to outdo himself.

Then about ten minutes into this show I began to sit up and take notice. Something set me on edge. Old and tired as the routine was, the guy who was doing it was downright strange.

He was *good*. I say it myself. Most magicians keep up a running line of patter and phony good-will to cover up the sloppiness. You can put anything across in the middle of a well-timed yak. But this guy didn't. He hardly had any patter at all. He'd give the old hocus-pocus right along with every trick, but he didn't try to impress anybody with it. In fact, you could hardly hear it. He had a good flambuoyant style, and he could have wowed them if he'd turned on the charm a little, but he didn't, and the audience wasn't with him. I kept thinking, buddy, you're going to be in trouble if you don't get this crowd nailed pretty soon, especially with friend Denny here fighting you for star billing. But the guy just gave Denny the cold shoulder, pretended he wasn't there, and went right on with the show, even when the crowd started going along with Denny's wisecracks.

But I wasn't paying much attention to Denny now ... I was watching this guy. Like a hawk. I know a lot of people in magic, and I'd never heard of the Great Nicolletti, but this guy was top-rate. I'd never seen a technique like this before. He made those silks sit up and whistle for him. Every move was neat, and even without patter I couldn't spot his sleights. Not a one. That guy was standing up there acting as if this was all real *magic* ... and he was getting away with it in a fashion that was sinful to see.

Well, I started wondering if I was getting rusty. Contrary to the old

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bromide, the hand is *not* quicker than the eye. The eye is just more vagrant. It wanders from the subject at hand too easily, and that's how the magician makes his kill. But I knew that for every trick there was a gimmick, and I was looking for it, and I wasn't finding it. I leaned over and nudged Denny. "This guy is sensational," I whispered. "I never saw anything like it!"

And Denny guffawed, and pinched his girl friend, and said, "Sensational, the man says! Like a B movie!" And then he pitched his voice a little higher, and shouted, "What a Rube!" and the crowd roared.

I spotted a big boy moving down from the rear with blood in his eye. "Shut up," I said. "You want to get your skull broken?" But then I saw the magician catch the bouncer's eye, and shake his head a little. And that, too, was a new one in my book. I became very entranced with this Great Nicolletti. I began to wonder just what was his pitch.

Well, he started to move into some bigger things, then. He brought out a girl, and gave her the old "hypnosis" treatment, and then started a slick little quick-change series that I'd never seen before. He threw the cloak over the girl, and jerked it off, and she had on different clothes, right down to the spike shoes and stockings. He did it again and again, and each time she had different clothing on, and a little less each time, too. Denny found the show looking livelier by the minute, and started shouting at the guy to miss altogether, just once. Nicolletti gave him a look that would have frosted a blast furnace, and took his bow when the gal was one inch this side of decency. He even got a ripple of applause for that one, and moved on to the old guillotine routine with the girl. Still smooth. But about five minutes later he floored me, when he stepped forward and said, "Ladies and Gentlemen, for your amazement tonight I shall now present a magical illusion of great rarity." His voice was soft, and he bowed his head modestly. "The Mystery of the Floating Aasrah."

I felt a sharp pang of disappointment. The show had been so very good so far. And now he was going to botch it. He couldn't ***help*** but botch it. It was a dirty shame ...

I'd seen the Aasrah done only once ... the authentic Aasrah, I mean. It's been said that there have been only five magicians in the history of the stage who have known the secret of the Floating Aasrah illusion, and only one of them is alive today. And there were so many cheap imitations. I sat forward, and even Denny shut up for a minute and paid attention. Nicolletti took this girl, and waved his fingers in her face for a minute, and then caught her when she collapsed, and laid her down on a flat couch. The record player changed to something snaky and oriental, and the lights dimmed a little, and then this guy moved back and forth behind the couch, waving his hands over the girl and muttering ...

And then, the girl started to rise. She was flat as a board, and she rose evenly, from head to toe. In a few seconds she had cleared the couch completely, her hair hanging down below her in a cloud; in a minute she was floating in the air a foot about the couch, and in two minutes she was three feet up. The tent was dead quiet. The magician took a big white hoop, and tossed it down to the crowd; I caught it, and gave it a careful look, and tossed it back. Then he started passing it around the girl, passing her body through it, and still she floated. Not ten feet away from

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my nose!

And then Denny let out his raucous laugh. "So the hoop's got a break in it," he roared. "She's got wires on her ... I can practically see them..."

The girl dropped like a brick onto the couch, and gave a jerk, and sat up, rubbing her behind-side and swearing to beat Ned. The crowd burst into a roar of laughter. Nicolletti's face went white, the coldest, angriest face I've ever seen. And then he clenched his fist, fighting for control, and bowed to the audience. He waved his hand toward the curtain, and a tall, painted cabinet was wheeled out. Then, as if nothing had happened, Nicolletti said, "My friends, since you are so perceptive tonight, I have a special treat for you. I call it the Cabinet of Shima. Some call it the Cabinet of Death ..." He flashed his smile, and strode back to the cabinet, throwing open the front and back sides of it. "See this!" he cried. He walked through it, banging the doors open and closed again. "An empty cabinet, with nothing to hide! But it has the greatest powers, this cabinet." His voice lowered, and suddenly he was throwing in all the flambuoyant showmanship that had been missing all evening. "It is a cabinet of wonderful power. It can control the fate of men!" He leaned over, smiling down in Denny's face. "And you, my friend ... I will require an assistant. Unless you are afraid of the unknown ..."

Denny jumped up and made a mock bow to the cheering crowd. With a smirk on his face he was up on the stage before I could stop him. He thumbed his nose at the audience, just for effect, and then stuck his hands in his belt in his favorite hayseed parody, and said, "Okay, doc ... show us this here trick."

Nicolletti was all smiles. "First I should like you to examine the cabinet," he said. "Study it very carefully, my friend! Tell the audience anything strange that you see ..." He followed Denny over to the cabinet. "See? No trapdoors, no wires ... no hidden knives ... just a simple open cabinet."

Denny looked it over elaborately, and grinned. "Don't look so magical to me," he said. I shook my head, trying to catch his eye. He was walking right into it. It doesn't pay to get *too* smart with these guys ... somehow, the heckler always seems to get it, in the end. But Denny was having the time of his life. "Lousy paint job," he said. "Or did you do it yourself?" And the audience roared.

The magician nodded approvingly, and bowed to Denny. "Will you be so kind as to step inside?"

Denny stepped inside. Nicolletti smiled at him. "Of course you understand that you have volunteered .. I can't be responsible after the doors close. If you'd prefer to go back to your seat.. "

"Come on," said Denny. "Magic me."

The Great Nicolletti closed the back side, and hooked it. Then he closed the front side of the cabinet, closing Denny inside. The lights dimmed mysteriously, and the magician stepped back, and with a loud voice cried out some words that I couldn't quite catch.

Then there was a bright flash of red light, and a tremendous crashing of cymbals. The magician stepped forward and threw open the cabinet doors. He walked through to the cheers of the audience, and bowed low to the accolade with a triumphant smile.

Denny had disappeared.

I was feeling quite satisfied with the whole business as I made my way out of the tent onto the Midway again. Denny had been begging for it all evening. And if

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the boys waiting out back had beat his face in for him, so much the better. He had it coming to him. Just because a good magician had to make a living in a cheap carny was no sign he had to put up with that sort of yap all evening. I ducked off the Midway, behind the tents, and started looking for the magician's trailer. I wasn't worried about Denny ... he'd make out all right. But I was mighty curious about the Great Nicolletti. The guy had missed his calling. He didn't belong on a cheap Carny Midway. He belonged on Broadway. The guy was great.

I found his trailer and knocked on the door. Nicolletti shouted from inside, and I walked in, and he looked up from his dressing table with an odd expression on his face. "Ah," he said. "The other gentleman from the front row. You came to tell me what a fake I am, perhaps?"

"Fake!" I cried. "I came to tell you what a great show I thought you gave."

"Oh?" He turned around to face me. He didn't smile.

"What are you doing in a cheap carnival like this?"

"I like it here," said Nicolletti. "Before, people always bothered me, always came asking me questions, making life miserable. Here people don't bother me." He eyed me up and down. "You enjoyed the show?"

"Mister, that was the greatest magic show I ever saw in my life, and I've seen a lot of them."

"That's nice," said the magician, and he turned back to the mirror.

"You don't understand what I mean!" I protested. "That was *great*, man! You belong up there with Blackstone and Mulholland and Danti! I mean it ... I've played around with magic, I know almost every one of the tricks you used ... and I couldn't spot the gimmick in a one of them!"

He swung around sharply. *"Gimmick!"*

My jaw dropped. "Aw, now look ..."

He stood up slowly, his eyes blazing. *"Gimmick!* You think that show tonight was the work of a piddling faker? You think that I, the Great Nicolletti, am a mere *trickster*, a cheap prestidigitator, a fumbling patter-vendor? You watch me all night, and you think I use *gimmicks* to perform my magic? Get out of here with your insults...."

"Now, look ... I take it all seriously, too, but after all ..."

He shoved his face up into mine, glaring at me. "You've heard of Cagliostro, perhaps? You've heard of Katerfelto? Yes? Merlin? The great Comus? These are the names that belong with mine! *Blackstone*, indeed! I am a *magician*, and you call me a peddler of cheap tricks!" He was shaking with rage. *"Get out!"* he cried, "before I show you a real trick or two ..."

I got. I know a nut when I see one. Can you imagine a guy really believing that his magic was real? "Sorry, mister," I said as I went for the door. "I didn't mean to insult you ... really I didn't. I just thought your technique was great ..." I stopped, remembering something, and looked back at him. "By the way," I said: "Where will I find my obnoxious friend?"

He gave me a look that nearly froze me. He looked at me with the eyes of a man who means precisely and punctiliously what he is saying. "You won't," he said.

—Alan E. Nourse

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Sometimes a freedom is all the more valuable for the fact that it remains a secret . . .

X: YES

THOMAS M. DISCH

Once in the booth, with the curtain drawn behind her, Mrs. Roman closed her eyes. White pinpricks of light, constellations of the interior dark, twinkled to the rhythms of her own breathing. If freedom does exist, if it is not just another word to fatten the national rhetoric, then one must experience the thing at exactly such moments as this. It declares itself in this sudden intense awareness of one's own body, its distinctness and isolation; its animal mastery of space, its absolute, solipsist authority. Nothing may then intervene—neither the workaday calculus of consequence nor the slow sure arithmetic of precedent—between desire and the fulfillment of desire. For with freedom one is equally the master of time: the present abrogates the future with the past.

The beauty of such freedom is insupportable for very long; it is too equivocal. The sheer intensity, unrelieved by action, will soon register as terror. Mrs. Roman teetered at just this brink. The pencil was in her hand. The ballot was spread open on the narrow wooden ledge. A bead of sweat, a premonition, formed at the center parting of her hair. Without breathing and unaware that she held her breath, she marked her X in the upper square.

Wiping away the trickle of sweat, she refolded the ballot and left the booth. She dropped the folded paper into the slot in the padlocked ballot box. She smiled at Miss Haigh, who, other days of the year, was only an assistant at the library, in charge of the children's room, humblest precinct of the civic temple. Miss Haigh signalled the next voter to enter the booth.

Leaving the courthouse lobby she discovered that the rain had started up again. It would go on raining, intermittently, all that day. No single cloud could be seen in a sky of uniform, ageless gray. Prematurely, the elms of the small park were shedding dry green leaves on the dry tawny grass. The flag hung from the top of its pole wet and unwaving. Nothing seemed to celebrate.

With the automatism of habit Mrs. Roman worked the combination of her bicycle lock, wheeled it down the sidewalk to the street, mounted, pedalled away—and with movements as small and precise as these the world of buildings, streets and sky repossessed Mrs. Roman, steered her, took her home. The sensation of that moment in the booth, the small secret treachery of her X, was at the mercy now of memory, and memory twisted it into mere wistfulness, shaded it with regret. She ought not, of course, have voted Yes. Always, on previous

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Referendums, she had voted No, and she had intended to vote No again today, but something had come over her. It was too late now to undo it. The ballot was in the box, the box was locked. In any case, what did one vote matter among so many? A drop in the ocean.

It was something she had never understood before, how anyone *could* vote in favor of the Referendum: now she couldn't really understand why *she* had. Perhaps it was always like that, for all the people who voted that way, a moment of giddiness, something out of the blue.

She stopped at the automat on her way home. The other stores would be closed because of the holiday. While the automat hummed soft Muzak to itself, she took what she needed—cornflakes, salt, soya meal, soup mix, bread, TV Guide, fresh oranges and onions, a can of tuna, freeze-dried peas—from the shelves and brought them to the out counter. Paying her charge card into the register she had an obscure feeling that by this action she were redeeming her vote, tipping the balance back to some more quotidian Yes.

Yes, automat. Yes, bicycle. Yes, street. Yes, Xavier. Yes, children, dinner will be ready in just a minute now.

She parked the bicycle in the garage beside the DeSoto, Xavier's pride and the first altar of their marriage. Since fuel rationing the car had left the garage less often than she went out of the house, but Xavier seemed to love it all the more for being an invalid.

The wind had once again taken the plastic lid from the garbage can, and once again the lid, with a wonderful, invariant tropism, had found its way to Mrs. Youatt's rock garden, which had become, during the summer's long drought, a garden of rocks only. As she was retrieving it, Mrs. Youatt called to her from a kitchen window. "Bea! Have you been to the polls?"

Mrs. Roman waved the red disc of plastic at her neighbor deprecatingly. "Yes. And shopping too."

"Good! Good!" Mrs. Youatt, with only one child to keep her busy, had a large sense of civic duty. "Were there many there?"

"Not very many. I think the weather is keeping most people indoors."

Mrs. Youatt shook her head disapprovingly—at such weather, at human weakness. "May I ask—what will you be doing this afternoon, Bea?"

"Nothing much. Some mending. The kids will all be in school, and Xavier's at the union office. Do you need me to babysit?"

"Would you, please? Just long enough for me to get in to the courthouse and back. What time would be best?"

"Any time. Just come and knock."

She returned to her own backyard, dodging under the clotheslines, and wedged the lid tightly over the top of the can with a scrap of cardboard. She carried the bag of groceries into the kitchen, remembering only as she put them away in the cupboard that they were almost out of coffee. She made a neat mental X beside 'Coffee' in the shopping list of her mind. Time enough to pick that up tomorrow.

She had forgotten already that she had removed tomorrow from her calendar.

Because the vacuum cleaner wasn't working, Mrs. Roman had to go about on all fours, picking the lint from the rug by hand. The plastic-bristled broom was worse than useless, a limp flimsy thing. Xavier kept promising to repair it himself and save money. The poor old rug was as patchy as her mother's sick spaniel, the

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one with ear trouble, but the linoleum underneath was even patchier, and beneath the linoleum the floorboards had rotted through in places.

At three o'clock she heated the formula Mrs. Youatt had left for Jolene. Formulas, diaper pails, nights of teething and colic—for her all of that was done with. The pill might fail (the twins had proved that), but not the loop, the loop was infallible, hurrah for the loop!

Baby refused its bottle, dribbling the white froth out over its bib. No strategy or diversion, no amount of coddling, rocking, cooing, love, neither being left in its buggy to bawl ignored, could overcome its sincere aversion to this surrogate mother, this non-Youatt. Mrs. Roman felt one of her headaches coming on. She carried baby and buggy upstairs to the boys' bedroom, closed the door, and barricaded herself against the noise in the kitchen. With any luck it would have cried itself to sleep before Mrs. Youatt returned.

She put water on to boil, then recalled that she'd had the last of the coffee at lunch. She turned on the radio, which immediately inquired whether there was enough excitement in her life. There wasn't, and she couldn't remember the time there ever had been. Excitement was not the *point* of life, whatever radios may think. Something else is the point.

Then music. We all like to listen to music when we're doing simple chores about the house. She set to work on the pile of mending, pushing a stone up to the top of the hill and letting it roll down the other side. But she couldn't concentrate, the day had turned sour on her, she was off her stride. She found herself waiting anxiously for the occasional newsflashes, though she knew that nothing could be learned from these. The whole operation was handled by machines, machines being so much more reliable than people, especially at doing figures. The post mortem would not be released for two days. The day *after* tomorrow.

Not that there was any doubt at all that the Referendum would be defeated. It was always defeated. The Referendum was a kind of ritual, like going to Mass or confession. Its only practical consequence was that anyone with a job got the day off, or a half-day. If it hadn't been for her own inexplicable defection that morning she would not be feeling the least concern now.

The bottle of formula was standing, still three-quarters full, on the drainboard. Mrs. Roman removed the nipple and emptied it into the sink. It made large white bubbles as it went down the pipe. Upstairs the baby had stopped crying at last.

Mrs. Youatt returned just before four. "How was she?" she asked.

"Jolene was a perfect darling," Mrs. Roman said. "She drank all her formula like a charm and then she popped right off to sleep. I took her upstairs because it's quieter there once the children come home. How was it at the polls—did you have to wait long?"

"There weren't many there, actually. The weather, I suppose."

"Yes, it's been a miserable day."

"But that shouldn't be an excuse."

"Yes," Mrs. Roman said, "*we* made the effort, didn't we?"

The children came flooding into the house in wet coats and muddy boots, all five at once, noisy with their news. The school had held a mock Referendum.

"And was it defeated?" Mrs. Youatt asked gravely.

"Oh no, it passed," Marily assured her.

Mrs. Youatt shook her head. "Well, I

(Continued on page 144)

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BIG MAN

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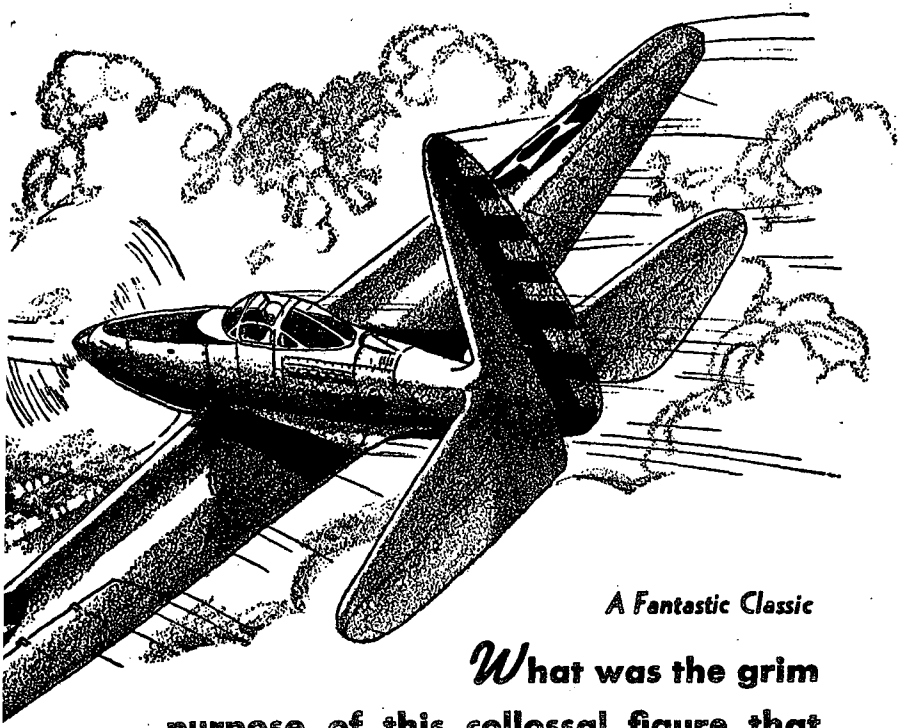
BY ROSS ROCKLYNNE



A Fantastic Classic

What was the grim purpose of this collossal figure that stalked steadily toward Washington?

ON that night of June, 1978, A.D., across the miles of quiet water, from island to island, from coastal steamer to pleasure yacht, from ship to island to radio stations on the Florida mainland, flashed mad, coded messages:

"I saw it, I tell you. It was a man. I saw it with my own eyes. He came right out of the horizon. He filled the whole horizon and threw a big shadow down onto the water. I couldn't see the Moon. . . . For God's sake, tell me, did you see him?"

From a coast guard station on the Floridan coast:

"Are you crazy? If this is a gag! Listen—"

"But I *saw* it!" Wildly. "I *think* I saw it. . . . Maybe I didn't. My head aches. Wait till tomorrow. Maybe I'm sick. I *must* be sick."

But verifications skittered madly across that stretch of quiet sea. People had seen a man, a *big* man, coming up out of the sea!

"Did you see it, WX31D?"

"Did I! Thank God *you* saw it! If you hadn't—I don't know what . . ."

The sun came up, bathing the world in the hideous light of reality it must

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face. And the mad messages skittered across the world and the sea.

There was a man striding through the ocean, through the quiet Atlantic.

On the Floridan coast, people who hoped they weren't mad saw that man, saw him swelling out of the smallness perspective gave him, saw him rising out of the sea like a monster of olden fable.

Great arms he had, with immense, mountainous biceps, and shoulders that were the acme in human strength; a face which but for its size might have been that of an ordinary man; a long, evenly designed nose that swept for hundreds of feet down between the chasms of the cheeks; eyes as fiery as twin suns; lips as thick around as the body of a python; flat chest bounded by easily flowing pectorals; mile-long legs the muscles of which made valleys of shadow with each motion.

That was Big Man, as first he came to the eyes of humanity.

ALL sorts of wild, lunatic messages went skittering across the nation, touching at last the ears of the president.

He smiled. What strange babies his people were that yet they believed in fairy tales!

"You say this man is coming in from the open sea. And you say he must be more than a mile, perhaps *two* miles high! Certainly you can see the absurdity of it? That such a thing cannot be? Very well—it is no more than a mirage!"

But no! Could a mirage sweep the clouds from its path?

But the president continued to smile. "Very well, then. We shall dispatch an order—a few planes—"

Planes came flitting up from the dull land surface, went swarming and buzzing like a horde of mosquitoes toward the Big Man who, that sunny afternoon of 1978 A.D., came striding through the sea toward the nether tip of Florida. They hesitated a mile distant; circled in violent alarm; went on again, flying into the Sun, came within staring distance of those acre-big, fiery eyes. They broke formation, went back toward land as fast as mechanical limitations would let them.

"He's real!"

A nation, a world, went collectively mad.

BIG MAN plowed through the water of the outflowing Gulf Stream, veered around the tip of Florida, into the Gulf, and straight northwest, until, after two leisurely days, he stood out from the Mississippi Delta.

There he stood for half a day. And now people saw, as they stared in fascination, that the monster, this Colossus, was nothing less than human. For the winds high up there caught at his black hair, and streamed it out, and his body threw a long shadow onto the water.

It had been a man that strode those waters during the day and, as the sun went down, through the star-sprinkled night; it had been a man that set foot into the oozing muck of a lightless sea-bottom. A monolith of human flesh, a Titan of extra-titanic dimensions, almost an Atlas who held the world on his shoulders.

Newsreel planes began to zip out from the land, to shoot around the head of the monster with nerveless courage—until he raised a hand and brushed them away like disquieting flies.

And they fled, but knew then that it was a man, only a big man, and not a god. There was no wisdom in the eyes; indeed, in their blue, gleaming depths there was the look of a child

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which is proud of its strength and size.

Of clothing he had none, if one might discount the collar. A collar! A frame work of metal that might easily have landed several planes, and closer to the neck a metal enclosure with doors and windows. And attached to lips and ears, at times, metallic objects which might have been, respectively—a transmitter?—a receiver?

Toward land Big Man went. Freighters and pleasure craft which had, with the greatest of courage, steamed around and between the unbending pillars of his legs, plowed desperately away. It was a wild sea they had to battle.

Carefully Big Man picked his way, taking great care to harm no living thing or structure. Up the Mississippi he went. His feet were huge things, half a thousand feet broad, but he carefully planted them in mid-channel. He went slowly. Too great a speed would have caused giant waves to overlap the levees. Even then, the river became unruly. A flooded bayou drowned a town. A giant foot caught unwittingly in the structure of a bridge that spanned the turbid stream.

Up the Mississippi went Big Man, a moving Colossus, that finally stopped at the mouth of the Ohio and threw a shadow a solid ten miles up the river. Cairo was quiet.

A thunder voice spoke, took control of the radio waves, ousted them out of the ether, substituted itself, blatted from every radio of the land, and of some parts of the world.

Big Man spoke! And the president, who had laughed, stood shortly before a microphone, wetting his lips.

"It is Big Man who speaks?" he whispered.

"Yes," said the Voice.

"WELL, then, I am the president, whom you asked for. I am glad you have spoken. There are so many things we must know. Who are you? From whence do you come? Are you human? I believe you are human, Big Man, for though you swelled the waters of a bayou and drowned a town, and wrecked a bridge at New Orleans, I know you have been careful. For that I thank you properly. Now tell me who you are and why?"

The Voice that came floating down out of the clouds was deep, even, slowly paced.

"Your questions are natural. Yet, hereafter, you will desist from asking them. Know only that I am—Big Man!

"Yes, I have been considerate. I realize that henceforth rivers can be my only road. I will continue to be considerate if you so wish it. If there have been any human lives lost, then I am sorry, but every sweeping change in the history of the world occasions that."

The Voice became solemnly insistent.

"Yes, this is revolution. But, if you so wish it, it shall contain no deliberate bloodshed. I created myself for but one purpose. Not to reap personal glory, or to glorify myself with an unexampled amount of power, but to better the world that lies at my feet.

"Listen to me, Mr. President. I am huge. I am powerful. I am equipped mentally to solve every problem that puzzles a long-weary, long-unhappy world.

"Henceforth, I am the master of human destinies in America."

The president laughed, a tired, old sound.

"You are the master of human destinies," he said, as if wishing to share in some joke. Then, querulously: "But you are *not* the master of America. *I* am the president. You must under-

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stand."

"It is you who does not understand!" Sharply. "Mr. President. Are you not sad because the world suffers so? And is it not evident to you that the world has all the possibilities of a Garden of Eden?"

"All the possibilities of a Garden of Eden," echoed the president feebly.

"Well, then, and why is it not so?"

"It is the way people are made, Big Man. The human race simply has not had enough time to reach Utopia. It must come gradually."

Impatience crept into the god-like tones.

"Bah! Are you going to dawdle, and let the golden age of the human race slip by? I am going to remake your pitiful world! Why haven't you taken advantage of its liberal resources? Man, above all things, must learn contentment. You, and a hundred others like you, will continue to mismanage the opportunities that eagerly await you. And I have come to take over those duties."

A BILLION people, in all parts of the world, were listening. It was one lone, bewildered man, who had to make answer.

He said, "It is impossible."

"Then," came the cold, godly tones, "there will be bloodshed."

"Bloodshed is not necessary," came the president's tense whisper. "Go back into the sea whence you came. Depart at once, I implore you! You are not aware of the impertinence of your request. I think you are a fool even to think we would accede. There are no dictatorships in the Americas. We are democracies. It is mass rule. It is the people who decide everything. One man is fallible. He makes mistakes that lead to great unhappiness. . . . I implore you."

A silence grew that shrieked across the world, and a rage grew with the silence.

"To think that an imbecile should rule a nation," whispered the Voice from the clouds. "There will be bloodshed, then."

Still feebly, still hopelessly, came the president's tenuous voice. "I am sorry, Big Man. I am truly sorry. There will be bloodshed, but—it will be your blood. Big Man—we must kill you."

And the answer to that came back, icily scornful. "I am coming to Washington, Mr. President, and it is *you* who shall die, along with your city!"

MOVING with an ease and slowness that bespoke contempt, the monster thereupon moved up the Ohio River. Still he was careful, still considerate. The sun behind him, and a dozen sprawling towns at his feet, he forged toward Washington, a Juggernaut of potential destruction.

Past Louisville, past Cincinnati, its streets and buildings and river front thronged with hushed people, staring affrightedly at the Colossus whose head was lost out of sight two miles up into the clouded sky.

Past Wheeling, and Pittsburgh; and down the Potomac.

Big Man was going to Washington, threat in every lineament of his insanely impossible bulk.

IN Washington, atop a private residence on Pennsylvania Avenue, a man and a girl stood with a good, strong wind lashing at their faces.

The man was clad in the uniform of the Army Air Corps, the silver strap of a Lieutenant Colonel on his shoulder. He was big. He had coal black hair. In one of his large, tanned hands he held the small, white hand of the girl, who was shivering under her light, sum-

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mer dress.

She whispered, her dark eyes wide, "It seems impossible. A man that big—"

She broke off, her breath catching in her throat, as her eyes centered again on the magnificent torso of Big Man, who, moving with leisureliness of contempt, was descending on Washington.

Jason Smith's face was white. His thoughts fled back ten years. Again he heard that cold voice, speaking words that had burned themselves into his brain.

"Someday, Jason, I'll rule the world! What is money? I want power!"

"I think everybody ought to evacuate Washington," Sandra DuBois continued with a shudder. "Why does the president insist on staying? All that monster has to do is put a foot on top of the capitol, and the hope of the nation is gone. . . . What are you thinking of, Jason? Why aren't you listening?"

He started, whirled on her fiercely.

"How can I listen? I've got thoughts that stop up my ears! For ten years I've kept a promise, and because I kept it, Big Man is out there now!"

"What in the world are you talking about?" the girl whispered, drawing herself in sudden compassion toward him.

"I'm talking about Big Man!"

He took her hands, led her across the roof to two chairs. They sat down.

"Sandra—I know who it was that talked down out of the clouds to the president. Once he was my best friend, and he showed me things, and told me things, that he made me promise never to reveal.

"That isn't Big Man who is talking," he went on in a tense whisper, the girl watching him with alarmed eyes. "Big Man has the eyes of a child. He is proud that he is big. I'll bet he hasn't an atom of malice in his whole body. It's the man behind Big Man! Clive Martin! He who sits up there in that 'collar' around Big Man's neck.

"Clive Martin is an ordinary man, made of the same stuff as you and I. But he's a scientific genius, has a humanitarian instinct tinged with a lust for power."

He stole a look at the Colossus.

"How could a man grow to that size? Not naturally, certainly. Clive Martin did that! I saw Big Man when he was of normal size, when he was no more than eighteen years of age. Clive took that youth, took his whole life, made him into that! Glands!

"I've seen guinea pigs of Clive's that grew to heights of twenty-five and thirty feet. Rabbits too. And he had a dog, a St. Bernard, which, although it loved him and whimpered when he came near—its whimpers were like thunder because its voice-box was so large—he finally killed it. He was afraid it might jump the seventy-foot palisade it was enclosed in.

"But he let the boy grow. He worked with a pituitary-extract—tethelin. If you inject it into mice it doubles their growth. He worked at it—most of his life. He told me the pineal body and the pituitary gland were the master glands. That was his ambition. He was going to control those master glands, and through them make giants, giants whose glands would keep on working, past the limit of growth, in complete harmony. Yes! What if the glands could be kept working overtime, harmoniously, indefinitely? Wouldn't the end product be that man over there, striding down the Potomac?"

"WHAT about the boy?" she asked.

"He was the victim of an ex-

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treme case of aphasia. He couldn't speak a word, had no memory, was a baby in mentality. He went ahead, let the boy grow, giving him injections. And I've known it ten years," he said hollowly. "I knew that some day Big Man would come."

He arose, pulled her to her feet.

"And now," he smiled bitterly, "I've got my orders to fly against it. At noon."

"But they were going to kill it!"

"Not now. The President knows there's power behind Big Man—and he knows that power, that other man, lives in the collar around Big Man's neck. That's the objective he gave us. We're supposed to occupy the collar."

He shuddered.

"Fine! A squadron of planes trying to get through arms three quarters of a mile long!"

As hundreds of thousands of others were doing, they watched Big Man, the sun shining on his bronzed body, flashing in shadows and ripples of light across the square mile of foot-thick epidermis. A cloud swirled behind him, enveloped his waist. His arms swung in easy motion as he picked his way down the Potomac.

"I might not come back," Jason said. He put strong arms around the girl, trying to still her trembling. He kissed her once, tenderly, and then put her away from him. He left the roof.

She watched him go. She walked back across the roof. She became fascinated at the monster's slow approach. Soon his whole body would be visible, and soon, also, she would see the suicide squadron go zooming up there, to die when the monstrosity began to thresh with its arms.

The sun was rising higher, toward noon. It was hot and white in the sky. To the left the Washington Monument might have been a straight, shiny sword raised in protest against the destruction of the city. Once in awhile the sun caught in the acre-big eyes of the giant and they became suns themselves, with a tinge of blueness to the blinding silver. Sometimes teeth flashed like polished metal. That hapless youth, so proud of his bigness, of the eyes of the world turned upon him. And soon he would murder Jason Smith . . .

She watched in incurable fascination. Big Man approached, knees now visible in the distance. How perfect he looked. If the rolling greenery of the land about, and the placid whiteness of Washington had not caught in the corners of the eyes, Big Man might just have been a normal human being. But there was perspective, miles of it—and Big Man was huge!

In one more moment, the sun was flashing from Big Man's shins. There was a scar on one of them . . .

Something was drumming in her brain. Some memory that struggled for recognition. Years . . . her soul seemed reaching out, as if she were yearning herself to Big Man. Dimly she groped, in frenzied awe. That scar. . . .

She began to sob. She ran from the roof. Onto the stairs, down into the street. She caught a cruising cab. The cab broke all speed laws—they had been forgotten anyway—getting to the airport.

IT was eleven when she got there. Jason Smith, so soon to fly against the monster, was now thinking his last thoughts, for soon he would look with certain eyes on death. But she, with a folly that was more strategic than even she could have guessed, was going to fly against Big Man before ever the army planes throbbed up into the sky.

Her single-seater slanted upward,

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executed a wing bank, and darted off like a startled bird. Someone, at the last moment, had tried to stop her. All planes had been ordered out of the air. A sizable bribe had brought hers out. Now they couldn't stop her. They *wouldn't* stop her!

With the sun astern, she set the controls into a gradual climb. Face white, lips set with a horror she could scarcely analyse, she grasped the stick, setting her course for Big Man's head.

It was not a fast plane. It was more a toy. By the time she reached Big Man, Jason Smith, flight commander of his squadron, would be within short miles of his objective with the smile of death in his eye. But she would get there first.

She pursued a long circle that would bring her up behind the Titan. Where would the eyes of that damnable Clive Martin, that fiend who had taken the life of a young boy, rest? Ahead? Yes, certainly. Therefore she would land from behind!

From afar she saw him. His legs had diminished with downward distance like railroad tracks converging. His head had grown like a baseball expanding. His arms swung with an evenness of motion that was pendulous. And now, with the sun astern, she throbbed with unswerving purpose toward the broad, bronzed back.

He filled the whole sky. The world beneath was spread out in squares of light and dark brown. Her plane struck an air bump, and another, an air valley. For a moment, she leafed down, scared to the bone. She brought the ship out.

So swiftly did the monster move he created a veritable windstorm in his wake.

Battling the fury of the wind with the sun shut out by the bulk of the Colossus, she drove for the collar. So intent was she on her purpose that the staccato puttering of words from the headphones paralysed her. The ship spun downward again, but dragging back her nerve she said tensely,

"I'm landing."

"You are not!" came back an incisive, commanding voice. "Stand away, or by Heaven I'll smash your ship!"

She bit her lip angrily. She wouldn't be balked.

"I'm landing," she repeated grimly. The collar came closer. The monster abruptly ceased motion, began to turn toward her. If one of those arms . . .

She cried breathlessly, "Listen to me! You can't murder me—Clive Martin!"

And in the moment of paralysed silence that followed she had banked the ship upward, come zooming in toward the collar. She landed on one wheel. The ship skewed around, dizzily. The nape of a tremendous neck, all shaggy with hair, was the last thing she remembered. There was a crash, a torturing scream from splintered struts.

SHE was lying on a bed when she awoke. She lay motionless. Remembrance flooded her. She kept her eyes closed. She remembered again the crash. She realized where she must be. She tensed her muscles. Now, if anything, she must be calm.

"Discontinue, please, your silly pretense," said a cold voice.

She started violently, and then lay still again, clenching her fists, the sweat breaking out coldly on her brow. She finally opened her eyes, sat up with one swift movement, with one hand dashed back a mass of auburn hair from her eyes.

Clive Martin sat there, at ease. She first saw his utterly white hair, and

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then the burning black of his eyes leaped out and seared her. How young the face, how old the eyes! Old with a flame of wisdom that transcended the petty malice of humanity. But at first glance, she knew she would hate him, would hate him forever. For he himself was a monster more monstrous than the Herculean youth whose shoulders he rode.

This was a tiny room. She saw a bed, chairs, a tiny window that overlooked the circular platform below.

Clive Martin's eyes met hers coldly. She recoiled inwardly. He waved a brown hand, young, sinuous, suggestive of the muscular flexibility of a viper.

"Don't be afraid," he murmured. The light in his eyes became more intense as he leaned forward. "You knew Jason Smith," he whispered.

She stilled quivering nerves.

"Yes," she answered defiantly. "He told me who you were, what you've done—"

"What have I done?" he queried softly.

"What have you done? Why, you've ruined the life of a boy who could have lived the life God intended him to live. You've taken away all the joys and ecstasies of a normal existence. You've—"

The white-haired terror said softly, "Big Man is happy. He doesn't know anything else. He's been too occupied with his own growth. No. I wouldn't say"—and he smiled—"that Big Man would want to be normal. He pities normal people!

"You see," he waved a slow, languid hand, "he was nothing when I discovered him running, naked, up the country road that led to my estate in West Virginia. He merely lived. He couldn't talk, didn't know how to eat. He was as good as dead. But I saved him. I taught him to speak. I taught him to revel in his bigness, to be proud of his growth. He is a child yet. I am his master, whom he loves."

"But he was a man," she whispered tensely. "You, with your scientific genius, made him into a monster, the slave of your desire, pulled by the strings of your mentality." She sprang to her feet, trembling with rage. "And somewhere Big Man had a mother, a father, a sister. Did you care—"

She stopped, her heart contracting. Out of the distance came a droning, a throbbing, an insistently approaching mutter.

Clive Martin's terrible eyes smiled. "Before I instruct Big Man to deal with the approaching armada, suppose you tell me why you are so unnaturally vehement? Does the menace you think Big Man presents to the world call for such valorous action on your part?"

Her answer came of itself, almost absently. She was thinking of Jason Smith, again, as he came on with the death-smile on his lips.

"I saw Big Man, standing in the sun," she whispered. "I saw a scar flash like a mirror on his shin. There was never but one scar like that in the world. I was sixteen. I dressed the wound that turned into that scar. An eighteen year old boy. He shinnied up a tree, shinnied down. A square scar, with a steeple on it.

"Big Man," she whispered, her eyes coming back to his, her voice breaking, "was my brother."

THE drone thundered at them. Girl and man stared at each other, almost without emotion, save that the eyes of the white-haired terror became blacker. His lips said something soundless, and then he turned to the radio room seen through the door.

His back was to Sandra DuBois. Like a tigress abruptly brought back

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to rage and courage, she leaped onto him from behind, long strong arms about his neck, and dragged him backward. He fell, shouting insensately. She jumped to her feet, intent only on one thing, to murder him, to step on his face with the sharp heel of her shoe, to squeeze his eyes back into his brain.

He reached up from his position, grasped her foot in two muscular hands, and with an unbelievable ferocity literally flung her across the room. She hit the wall, subsided into a heap that sobbed and groaned.

In the radio room, Clive Martin spoke through a peculiarly constructed radio that was adapted to Big Man's abnormal voice and hearing.

"Yes, master."

The intonations were those of a slave which awaits its master's bidding.

"You can see the planes coming in from the distance? I am afraid we will have to destroy them, Big Man."

The monster hesitated in speech so long that Clive Martin said sharply.

"You will have to overcome your dislike of the destruction of human lives! For if you do not kill them, they will hurt or possibly kill you!"

The monster seemed to sigh. He said.

"Yes, master."

Clive Martin quietly left the radio room, emerged on the platform built around Big Man's neck. He stood there quietly, listening to the drone that grew in his ears until it became a menacing roar, until the squadron hove into sight from the far distance.

With a little smile curving his lips, he watched the slaughter that followed.

The squadron came from the rear, in full flight formation. Big Man paused in his stride toward Washington. Now, in one swift movement, he pivoted, faced the oncoming combat planes.

An arm, perfectly proportioned, swished upward and out, dashed against the foremost plane, crumpled it into nothingness. The formation broke. The hideous clamor of laboring engines broke the even, monotonous drone that had pervaded the depthless upward sky 11,000 feet above solid ground. The arm again made a single motion, flung half a dozen planes against each other, crumpled them. They burst into flame, leafed earthward, trailing smoke streams.

The planes dipped and dived, trying in panic to escape the swooping deadliness of those arms. None did—except two.

In one of these was a man who suddenly went mad from the wholesale slaughter of his comrades.

In the other was Jason Smith. Thrice he eluded death by slipping with an uncanny accuracy through the very fingers of the giant. That could not last long. Other planes were being crushed like tissue paper around him.

But somehow he, and the man who had gone mad, lived through the horror of the flailing arms.

JASON SMITH drove determinedly for the collar. The other pilot madly catapulted his plane toward that huge, kindly, boyish face, revenge in his heart. He had forgotten his orders.

Yet, in the next moment, with the head of the giant less than a quarter mile distant, each would have been doomed. Jason Smith froze in horror. What was that long white column of flesh coming so ferociously toward him? No time to swerve, to escape—he watched in fascination. Long human arm—five fingers, palm with lines in it. A hand! It was going to slap him!

Clive Martin watched, as the planes escaped death. He entered his radio

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room with swift, irate strides, started to speak to Big Man.

He never spoke. Something heavy descended on his head. Without a sound, he subsided into a heap on the floor. Sandra DuBois, whimpering with horror, shouted then to Big Man, through the transmitter.

"Big Man! Don't touch those planes!"

And Big Man, lover of humanity that he was, and already blood-sickened, obeyed, though he knew it was not the master who spoke, but a softer-voiced being. In another five seconds, Jason Smith and the madman would have met death. Instead, the hand simply shot by with express train velocity.

The resultant suction caught the planes, drew them hundreds of feet upward. Jason Smith fought his plane, brought it out of danger, cut his speed, and made a perfect three-point on the collar.

The madman made no attempt to land. Snarling, he gunned his ship forward, until he was glaring into the kind eyes of the Colossus with his own hate-filled ones. He let loose a blast of machine-gun fire that swept across and again across the acre-big blueness of those eyes. He then lost control, and glanced against the monster's forehead. A wing snapped from his plane. Looping and twisting, he fell Earthward to his death. But he had succeeded. He had blinded Big Man.

FOR one horrible moment of unbelief, Big Man stood still. He had been hurt, hurt for the first time in his memory. He raised one hand falteringly, pawed at his eyes. Pain stabbed through his brain. He screamed, a sound nobody could have heard, since his larynx was so big. He started to sway, pawing at his eyes, emitting the soundless screams constantly.

Two miles below, his feet, so considerately placed in the middle of the Potomac, began to dance grotesquely, raising waves. One foot lifted, paused aimlessly above the water, and then came down on shore in the middle of a river town. The other foot dragged itself out of the water with a sucking sound, dragged through the town destroying seven frame houses and many inhabitants thereof.

Then the feet were gone. Big Man went staggering away into open country. He had never before traveled on dry land. Always he had been restricted to the sea, near the island where his master, by a strange science, had nurtured him from a six foot boy to a two mile giant. But now he ran at a velocity that was close to seven hundred miles an hour. He emitted from his mouth great screams of animal pain.

At the most, he was unaware of his actions, unaware that he was the cause of untold destruction. He was only aware of an unendurable pain, and he could not understand the darkness. He fled eastward across the state of Maryland, bounding rivers and streams, never knowing they were there. He planted one foot in Hyattsville, demolishing three houses and a bank and killing eleven people. He continued on, turning now slightly north, staggering like an animal in its death throes.

He pawed at his eyes, his hands coming away sticky. Great rivulets of blood were seeping from the fleshy bridge of his nose, and his eyes, where his eyes used to be, were red horrors. He unwittingly followed a highway that led through Patapsco, to its partial ruin. He went on to Baltimore, which he missed by a scant twenty miles. He was now heading due north. His mouth hung open slackly. He was sobbing,

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groaning, breathing hard. Blood began to drip down on the collar.

He missed both Glyndon and Grive. But he swathed a wide streak out of Carrollton. He crossed the state border into Pennsylvania. Here he stumbled in Piney's Creek, and fell, leveling a whole forest. When he rose to his feet, he had bloody scratches on his chest.

IT was while Big Man was going east across Maryland, before his fall, that Clive Martin recovered consciousness. Jason Smith and Sandra DuBois were standing above him, their faces white and sickened from the fact of Big Man's blindness.

The hand of the wounded man rose, plucked at the bandages which Sandra had wrapped around his head after washing the wound from a tank of distilled water. She drew the hand away, almost roughly.

The white-haired man opened his eyes, and centered them on the girl. He lay still.

"What happened?" he asked quietly.

"I hit you," she said calmly. "Jason Smith was in one of those planes. I told my brother to let them alone."

"Yes?" There was an edge of steel in his eyes, but still he was motionless. "After that, what happened? Why are we rising and falling so much?" Suddenly he jumped to his feet, faced the two of them savagely. "What happened to Big Man after you told him to let those two planes alone?"

Tears came unashamedly from her eyes. "The other man blinded him."

Clive Martin's whole face turned haggard and old in a moment.

"Ah-h," he whispered torturously, and like a drunken man, he staggered from the room. They heard him shouting Big Man's name into the transmitter. But Big Man did not answer.

Finally he came out again.

"I couldn't get in touch with him," he whispered brokenly. "He's blind. He doesn't know what he's doing. God knows what destruction—" He buried his face in his hands.

Clouds were beginning to gather around them. The sun was setting in the west. Big Man was plunging north, a Colossus bathed in golden light, a monster god taken leave of his senses. Clive Martin raised his head, and for the first time, apparently, noticed the presence of Jason Smith.

"It's been ten years," Jason said emotionlessly.

"Eh? . . . Yes. Ten years. The dream was beginning then." His hands moved vaguely. "How easily it was dissolved!"

Jason's lips twisted. "We used to be good friends, Clive. But now I have to put you under arrest."

He stopped, tense.

Suddenly there had been motion, irregular motion, a sense of swift, appalling descent. Jason leaped to a window. The whole world was crazily tilting. The horizons were slowly slanting to an increasing angle. Afar, Chesapeake Bay looked as if soon it would spill over onto the land.

Jason whirled. He snapped, "Big Man has stumbled. He's falling. We have to get out."

He grasped Big Man's pallid, apathetic creator by the arm.

"You've got a plane? Double seater? . . . Take Sandra, then!"

The three of them ran out onto the platform around the monster's neck, Jason with one arm wrapped about the girl. The white-haired man quickly flung open a pair of large double doors. Within the compartment revealed was a monoplane, double seater, wings curved back into the fuselage.

Jason, leaning against a wind that screamed up at them, practically threw

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the girl into the cockpit. Clive Martin, already at the controls, gunned the motor. The plane leaped out, the wings snapping into place. The wind became a shrieking whir. The plane was whirled away from the platform by a wind that was born of the high altitudes and the speed of the monster's descent.

Jason Smith barely made his own plane. It leafed away, dangerously. Big Man's stumbling body swooped past, a blur of arms and torso and streaming black hair. The suction drew the two planes down with him, and for thousands of perilous feet they fell, the props failing to spin, not taking hold until the planes turned into the wind. The planes climbed, with a scream from tortured struts.

SANDRA, white-faced, saw her brother fall. A voluminous cloud of dust rose, obscured for a time the fallen giant. Then he moved, blindly groped to his feet, and staggered south, a whimpering look on his face.

Big Man continued moving at enormous velocities. By the time the two planes reached Frederick, Maryland, he could not be seen at all.

The planes landed in a meadow outside Frederick. For two solid hours thereafter, Clive Martin, with the eyes of Jason Smith constantly on him, sat before a radio and whispered Big Man's name. But he received no answer.

He finally ceased. He met Jason's eyes, bitterly.

"Why don't you take me in?" he questioned, smiling ironically.

"I'm hoping you can stop Big Man, Clive. If anyone can, you can."

His shoulders drooped.

"I'm a little sorry for you, Clive," he said quietly. "Ten years ago, you were pretty enthusiastic about this Big Man you were going to create. Now it's come to this—your dream is shot. On account of a woman at that. If only you'd have tried to help the world in ways it could understand! How did Big Man eat—there isn't enough food in the world to feed him, certainly."

"Food from rock—transmutation, concentration," said Clive Martin. He bit at his lip, his eyes down.

"Yes," he said slowly, "I could have given that to the world—and a few other things, I guess. But it was all subsidiary to my real purpose. I was using all my money on food, money I needed for expenses, to pay my men, to pay for equipment and its transportation to the island. I was too busy for—" He shook his head. He reached out a hand, turned on the radio.

The announcer's voice blared out readily:

". . . blind. What an end for this monster of the skies, this incredible Titan who for five brief days held the nation in a reign of terror. Now that is over. Big Man, with a speed—velocity is the word—approaching that of sound, is rushing toward the sea. Less than five minutes ago, he almost stumbled in the Altamaha River, in Georgia. Like a poor dumb brute—"

Clive Martin turned the volume down.

"He'll go into the sea at the first opportunity," he muttered. "He was brought up with the sea all around him, and he used to swim all day. I made him swim all day, close to the surface, so nobody would see him. And whenever ships came to the island, I sent him into the sea. But he loved the sea . . . and he'll want to wash his eyes." He lowered his eyes. Sandra DuBois' lower lip was trembling.

BIG MAN stumbled in the Altamaha River. It had been five hours since

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he was blinded. He had recovered some measure of his reason. He understood now the reason for the pain, the reason for the darkness, the stickiness of the fluid that had dried around his eye sockets. He knew that his eyes were gone forever.

It was an unbearable thought. His greatest pleasure had been in his eyes. He remembered the island he was raised on. It had been a tiny, deep green jewel floating in the less green sea. He remembered the white-hot sun that hung in the sky. The sky itself, a blue, depthless bowl overhanging the sea. He remembered the white-hot sun on the water when first the master had permitted his ascension above its surface. These things were lost forever.

But now, as he stumbled a little in the Altamaha River, just a little south of Macon, his nostrils dilated hungrily —the familiar smell of the great salt ocean. A thrill of ecstasy shot through him. The sea was his home. He would go there, and he felt instinctively that his terrible wounds would heal. And then he would wait—until the master came.

He turned seaward. The smell of salt water in his quivering nostrils urged him to top speed. He felt the cool caress of the ocean at the Floridan border. Like a small boy, he dashed into it, wading out and out until the muck of the sea bottom oozed between his toes, until the cool line of water rose above his hips. He paused. It was night. He wished he could see the stars.

He dashed a handful of water across his eyes. There was a burning sensation. But the caked blood washed away. Soon, when he felt better, when he stopped groaning, he would call the master, and the master would answer.

Later, he heard a droning sound. That must have been in the morning. He was filled with terror. He plunged out into the sea, felt the cool water turn warm, and he remembered the Gulf Stream, in whose waters he had often disported.

The drone of the planes disappeared. He hoped they would not come back. He felt that he might be happy now. Except that he was hungry. That was a new thought—he must call the master. He adjusted his huge earphones, and mouthpiece, and spoke—but there was only the crackling of static.

Then . . .

THE air was suddenly still, moisture laden, sultry, oppressive. Rolling swells, heavy and oily, lapped against his legs. A heavy wind sprang up out of nowhere.

Clouds gathered around his head. He brushed them away. Some of them broke open, deluging him. He opened his mouth gratefully. The wind became stronger. Big Man leaned against it, forcing his way toward more open sea.

At his feet, huge waves piled up. The howling force of the wind became such that his going was made actually difficult, but he kept to his course—straight into the heart of that most violently destructive of all weather phenomena, the hurricane, which, at a velocity of more than one-hundred miles an hour was beginning to envelope him.

Far away in the tropics this hurricane had been born, to rage across the sea, living on its moisture, destined to die once again once it had traveled a short distance over land.

Warm, moist air had risen from the surface of an island, had liberated rain, and vast quantities of latent heat, which had warmed the air still more, and caused a continued expansion and ascent of the air. Cooler air had rushed in, had become warmed. Then,

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more precipitation, more latent heat set free—the process continued until the inrush of air had reached destructive velocities.

Thus was born the hurricane* into which Big Man stalked.

The wind screamed. Rain lashed with stinging force against the hollows of his eye sockets. He held a hand over them, and staggered through the storm.

He dropped into a depression on the ocean floor. The water rose to his chest. He gasped. Something strange was happening. There was a horrible pressure in his head.

The storm roared upward—the pressures dropped steadily, and the pressure in Big Man's head increased proportionately. His foot collided with a sea-cliff. He stepped upward a full thousand feet, and then something cracked in his head, a pain that was worse than all the pain in his shredded eyes—as if a bone in his head had been forced or sprung into a new position.

He dropped, moaning, to a sitting position in the sea, and in one moment, the world was quiet again, the storm apparently over. Big Man did not know that the ominous calm only presaged wind velocities as great or greater than those that had gone before, save that the wind's direction would change.

Something had happened.

Chaotic thoughts were tumbling in Big Man's brain. He remembered things, and a whole fairy-land world; that seemed to be apart from anything in his experience, now opened itself to his mind. He saw a little house, a country town outside Washington. He saw a brown-legged boy, talking to his mother. Saw a girl, younger than he. Sandra! The name leaped at him. In a dizzy flash, he was entering an airplane. His memory skipped to the plane's sickening fall. To the crash. His clothing had torn on a splintered brace. He had run whimpering up a country road, ghoulish trees on either side.

Then he saw a face. It was that of the master. The master who had fed him, taught him to speak, taught him that there was joy in bigness!

Big Man felt himself yearning back through ten years and two miles of height, to the brown-legged boy who had played with other boys. Those other boys were living life as they should. They were not big men, who had to look forward to the loneliness of bigness.

That was what the master had done to Big Man. There was nobody else like Big Man. He would be lonely all the rest of his life. That was what the master had done to him. The thought became a raging pain in his mind.

"The rat," whispered Big Man, whose real name was Eddie DuBois. "The dirty, stinking rat . . ."

THE other half of the hurricane came into being. Big Man huddled close to sea level. The rain and thunder and shrieking winds swept over and past him. In an hour they

* Hurricanes have their origin in the tropics, generally between 10° and 30° of latitude on each side of the equator. Most frequently, they occur off the eastern shores of the continents; where the oceans are studded with small islands; and occasionally along the west coasts of Australia and Mexico. In the South Atlantic they are unknown.

These oceans, at the points mentioned, have outstandingly high surface temperatures. As the air has usually traveled over long stretches of warm sea, it is saturated with moisture, the actual "fuel" of the hurricane. The island theory is the most plausible of many. It arises from the fact that a land mass radiates heat faster than an area of water.

The shape of the hurricane is circular, the air constantly spirals upward, and there is a low-pressure, windless center.

The hurricane follows the Trade Winds, until it takes on a path of its own according to Ferrell's Law. It is known as a hurricane in the United States, as a typhoon in the East, as a cyclone in India, as a baguio in the Philippine Islands.—Ed.

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were gone.

The sun came out. The clouds were swept away as if by magic. The surface of the sea became quiet and sparkling. Big Man, whose memory had been returned by the low pressures at the center of a hurricane, whose mind had also been maddened, came to his feet, and stalked landward, a single determination and thought written into the hard lines of his face, staring from his empty eye sockets.

All night long, Clive Martin, with Jason Smith keeping watch over him, tried to get in touch with Big Man. All night long there was no answer.

News announcers were still talking about Big Man. He had gone into the sea. A newsreel plane had sighted him, but he had run away.

During the night there were reports of a hurricane which came out of the sea and swathed a moderately destructive streak through Palm Beach, then died in the Floridan interior. And then—

"Big Man is coming in from the sea!" flashed over the radio. "I can see him from here. What a monster, this two-mile man! He's swinging in from the sea, steadily, swiftly, wading through the waves. What purpose has he in returning? For there must be a purpose, to judge by his—"

Clive turned it off. He tried to get in touch with Big Man again. His face went white as his hair. He pressed his trembling hands over the headphones. His lips opened and screamed:

"You'll stay where you are, Big Man! Where you are, d'you hear? Until I come to command you again!"

His eyes dilated. His lips twisted. He turned almost childishly wide and frightened eyes on Sandra and Jason.

"He won't listen to me!" he said in awe. "He keeps screaming for me. He's mad—mad!"

Jason scooped the headphones onto his own ears.

"Master!" came the scream. "It's me, Eddie DuBois. I want you. I'll show you when I get you that you can't do this to me. I'm going to tear you apart, that's what I'm going to do. I'm Big Man. I'm *big*. I'll stamp around and I'll break things up and I'll kill people. I want you. Master!" and thus it went, ceaselessly.

"He remembers," whispered Clive. "He's mad!"

"Not mad enough not to know what he wants," said Jason.

HE grasped Clive's arm, savagely. He whispered tensely. "You know what he means, don't you? He means he's going to destroy, kill, until he gets—you!"

"But when he gets me—he'll kill me!" Clive exclaimed in horror. Then he abruptly relaxed, and a quiet little smile came to his young-old face. He shook his head slightly. "But I won't give in to him, of course, Jason. I can't think of it. I've got too many things to give the world. The world can't afford to lose me—"

"The world can't afford to have you," Jason broke in cuttingly. "You're half a madman, Clive. You're a supreme egotist. You can't live the life of a normal man. This idea of mastering the world has been in your head too long. Now Big Man isn't yours, anymore, and the world isn't yours. You know you can never have it. You're spent, done for, your dreams have worn out, you're a shell! There's only one thing you're good for, and that's to stop Big Man. That's what you're going to do."

But still Clive smiled, quietly.

"I'm not going to be torn apart by Big Man," he said.

"You're going to get in your plane,

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and you're going to fly to Big Man!" Jason rapped out. "You're going—"

Out of nowhere, apparently, Clive Martin had a gun in his hand. His face was as calm as ever.

"You're going to die, Jason," he said quietly. "And Sandra has to die, too." He stood up from the radio, trembling a little, but his purpose was strong on his face.

Jason took a backward step, smiling queerly. He still had the headphones on his head, but they were shoved away from his ears, so that he heard Big Man as from a distance, madly calling out for the man who had been his master.

"Big Man still wants you," Jason said, steadily meeting the eyes of the man with the gun. He slowly moved backward and to the side, so that the extension cord of the headphones hung a little slackly below the menacing barrel of the deadly weapon.

The gun made a little commanding movement.

"Take those things off," Clive whispered tensely, his terrible eyes blackening still more. "With both hands."

Jason removed the 'phones, and after that all he had to do to deflect the white-haired man's aim was to take a single step backward, so that the extension cord straightened up beneath the gun. The gun fired, but Jason Smith was already leaping forward. The shot caught him in the fleshy part of the arm, but snarling, he hurled himself on Clive Martin, and, with a single clean blow, dispatched him. Sandra came forward with a little cry, at once seeing the blood on his arm.

"That doesn't matter," he told her roughly, but she nevertheless made him bare his arm, and worked over it a few minutes with iodine and bandages from a first-aid kit. Her grave eyes met his, then, questioningly.

"We're taking Clive to Big Man," he said grimly.

"I'll fly the plane with Clive in it," she said, and when he protested: "That'll be the best way, Jason. Clive has his plane fitted up for communication with Big Man. Your plane radio wouldn't affect his ears, they're so big. I'm Big Man's sister, too, and he'll listen to me, and maybe not to you."

He nodded shortly.

A FEW moments later, Clive securely tied in the rear of his plane, they slanted up into a sky that was now becoming mottled with clouds.

Big Man came in from the sea, vengeance in his heart. Vaguely, he knew the sun was westering, that if he followed the direction pointed out by the heat on his body, he would come to land. Continuously he shouted into the transmitter fixed before his lips, shouted for the master. He shook the last sea-water from his ankles as he emerged from a natural harbor directly into Brunswick, Georgia; he roared in delight as a building crumbled underfoot. He lashed about with arms and legs, laying a large section of the city in ruins. Then, as if scorning the remainder, he went on in search of new conquests.

Running at full speed across the land, his feet descended with such force that towns miles distant were shaken by the vibrations. His very footprints were tens of feet deep. He crossed the Altamaha once again. He went across Georgia. And all the while he was screaming insensately for the master. He was screaming so endlessly that he did not hear Sandra calling him.

Big Man went on, and missed Atlanta. He curved around, went northeast, crossed the Savannah River into South Carolina. He demolished Aiken.

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He followed the sun again, again crossed the Savannah.

Distinctly, then, he heard Sandra calling him.

"Eddie!" Big Man froze in his tracks. "Eddie, listen to me, please. I'm—Sandra!"

"Sandra," he said blankly. He quivered. "Yes—you used to be my sister, didn't you, Sandra? That was a long time ago. . . ." His voice returned to savagery. "That was before I became Big Man. Now I have no sister—I have nothing. Sandra?" he said plaintively, almost, "I want the master. Where is he?"

"I'm bringing him," she answered swiftly. "But you have to stand still—Eddie. You mustn't destroy anything anymore. And I'll bring you the master." Her voice broke, but she continued with determination. "And then you must go back into the sea, and you must stay there. No more destruction."

"I promise, Sandra," the giant said.

He listened to her swift, comprehensive instructions. After an hour of motionlessness, feet forked on the crest of two low-lying hills, he stretched out a hand, palm upward.

From the distance two planes sounded their approach. Big Man blind, could not see them, but he knew when they landed by the tickling sensation on the flat of his hand.

JASON and Sandra climbed from their planes, and hauled Clive from the cockpit. Between them, they carried him across the actual flesh of a man's hand, up and down gullies and valleys that were wrinkles in the hand. Where the palm slanted downward at the center, they placed him. He was conscious. His face was emotionless. There was no appeal or hate or fear in his eyes.

The girl and man stood there looking at him uneasily for a few moments, but said nothing. They could think of nothing, nothing to say. They left the bound man there, finally, and walked wordlessly back to their planes.

Jason took off, and Sandra followed. From a distance, then, she spoke into the transmitter, fighting to keep the horror from her voice.

"He's yours, Eddie."

She watched, wide-eyed.

Big Man stood motionless, hand extended. Had he closed the hand, Clive Martin would have been crushed. But the hand remained open for minute after minute. Slowly the look of savagery and hate passed from Big Man's face, and something of helplessness and self-contempt came instead. Then, with an infinitely tired movement, he wheeled in his tracks, his back to the sun, and went eastward, his hand still outstretched and now cupped a little.

The smell of the sea was in his nostrils again. He pounded toward it, set foot into its coolness once again. He went farther out. The water rose to his hips. Still he waded outward, deeper into his vast natatorium.

Sandra and Jason landed on the edge of the sea, and watched until he was lost in the watery distance.

Then she spoke into the transmitter, choking back her sobs.

"Where are you going, Eddie?"

She sought Jason's hand blindly.

"We—the master and I—are going into the sea," came Big Man's voice, rumbling deep. "In the sea there are places deeper than I am high. And when we get there—I will not swim."

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(Continued from page 5)

Piers Anthony is one of those who writes his novels first—and then seeks a publisher. He has been fortunate with several of his novels (which I mentioned earlier); with his Arabian fantasy he was not so lucky. I sympathized with him for that, even as I recognized that I myself might not, upon reading the novel, care for it. His was an "oddball" fantasy, one of those works which did not immediately fit an easy category. Some editors appear to select for their lists by the value of an author's name, or the ease with which his work fits smoothly into a convenient cubbyhole. As I remarked a couple of issues back, this has hurt the chances for many good, but unclassifiable stories.

In any event, I wrote to Piers and asked to read his novel, offering the possibility of serialization here, uncut, in its full, booklength form. (During the period in which I have been editor of these magazines, we have made no cuts in the novels we've published; you gain not one thing in waiting for their eventual book publication elsewhere.)

Piers responded with the 87,000-word manuscript of "Hasan," and immediately I read it with great interest.

As he points out in his Postscript (which will appear next issue, at the conclusion of the novel), "Hasan" is an adaptation of an existing tale from the *Arabian Nights*. It is, to use an ugly word, a "novelization." But it is also a fresh and absorbing new work. Anthony has taken the bones of the original plot and fleshed them out with his own intriguing, amusing, and occasionally thoughtful narrative. He has done considerable research, not only into the tales of the *Arabian Nights* themselves (see his article on that subject in our *Fantasy Fandom* department, elsewhere in this issue), but also into the geography and folklore of the surrounding lands into which Hassan adventures. And through all this he has done his best to remain faithful to the tone and spirit of the original story in his characterizations and plot devices.

In other words, "Hasan" is an adult fairy-tale.

I should imagine most of you read fairy tales when you were children—I did. I read a book called *Jack, The Giant-Killer* as soon as I could read (in fact, I credit that book with instilling within me the *desire* to read, and the awareness that reading could be fun)—and in short order re-read the several Oz books which had been read to me earlier. Thereafter I rampaged through the local town library, my church library, and my school's library, as well as the private libraries of friends and family, reading first all the fantasies and fairy-tale collections I could find (devouring the rest of the Oz books then written from the collection of my piano teacher), and re-reading them before turning to boys' adventure books and everything else that came to hand.

Nostalgia clouds my memories—I doubt my childhood was half as sunny and cheerful as I remember it now—but I know that a charming and engrossing fantasy has the power to transport me back into those simpler, happier climes. Unfortunately, the sparse vocabularies and often wretched style of those books I read as a child have become a barrier between me and my re-experiencing them. Once—would you believe it?—I read *all* the Rover Boys books, tracking them down in the attics of half the (then) forty-eight states. But I find them unreadable now.

"Hasan" restored my childhood to me—but without demanding the surrender of my adult mind. "Hasan" has all the cheerful magic of my youth, but does not ignore the drives or the sophistication I've

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since acquired along the way.

Put plainly, "Hasan" was a delight for me to read. And it was with considerable pleasure that I phoned Piers Anthony (who lives in Florida) to tell him I wanted it.

And here it is. Eighty-seven thousand words of the enchantment and adventure of the *Arabian Nights*—over forty thousand words in this issue alone. (You can read it now—the novel breaks neatly at this point between Hasan's first and second great adventures.)

No apologies are necessary, I think, for "Hasan"'s two years of rejection by other editors; other publishers. Their mistake is our good fortune. How many of them, having dismissed the novel as "just a fairy-tale," or "good *Arabian Nights*, if you like that sort of thing," can still remember their own youth, pouring over the pages of those somehow much larger, much heavier books? And how many have grown bored, jaded by the constant influx of neatly boxed manuscripts across their desks? "Eighty-seven thousand *words?*" How many pushed it back across their desks, unread, balked by the prospect of its length? (One thing to be said for outlines: they're so much easier to read at a sitting; you don't have to take them home with you and sit up half the night with them. Ah, but oh well,,,)

I told you, in our August issue, that I was looking for stories *outside* category, stories too "different" to find easy sales. In that issue the story was Alexei Panshin's "What's Your Excuse," about which you'll find a comment or two in the letters department this issue. Last issue it was Lin Carter's unusual "A Guide to the City"—which I predict will generate an equally favorable response. And this issue we go whole hog: Piers Anthony's "Hasan." I'm proud to say it's here. So, thank, Joanne Burger, and thanks Richard Delap—and, thanks, Piers Anthony.

This issue we also take another giant step: we've raised the price to 60¢, and we've cut the reprints to one classic story per issue.

I wish I could say that we had dispensed with the reprints entirely—because I know that's what many of you have requested. But for the time being that is still just not possible. Nonetheless, with our present type style and number of pages we are presenting a full length magazine of new material—about 70,000 words—*plus* the fantasy classic. This represents a considerable change in the balance of new material to reprints over, say, that of a year ago, and one of which we are proud.

We are also shifting ground for our fantasy classics; they will not come from before the mid- and late-fifties which previously represented our main lode. I am presently thumbing my collection of FANTASTIC ADVENTURES, shreds of pulp paper sifting out of the air upon every available surface, looking for hitherto unnoticed classic fantasy-adventure novelettes. I think I can promise you some pleasant surprises.

More important, the early responses to the other changes we've made in this magazine have been quite favorable, I'm glad to report. The *Fantasy Fandom* column has generated considerable enthusiasm, in particular (it's too early yet to gauge your response to our revived letters department, begun last issue). Perhaps I should restate the purpose of *Fantasy Fandom*.

It's my conviction that a great deal of worthwhile material is written for the fanzines these days that deserves wider publication. Most fan writers contribute to fanzines for their own pleasure, and

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from a desire to communicate with their friends in the sf community. The breadth of topics covered can only be hinted at in the reprints I choose—simply because the volume of fanzines published today is (as I mentioned earlier) enormous.

In selecting the article for republication here I use several criteria: First, if possible I want it to be current, and from a fanzine still being published and available upon request. This isn't always feasible—our first selection was from a fanzine unavailable to request, for example. Or, to take the piece in this issue, although the fanzine in question is still being published, the article appeared there three years ago.

Second I want to represent a fair sample of the broad spectrum of fan writing available. This too has its limitations. A great deal of the best writing in the fanzines is too ingroup in nature to be intelligible to FANTASTIC's much broader readership. Much of it depends upon a knowledge of the personalities involved. Additionally, it is not my purpose or desire to reprint amateur fiction from the fanzines in this department. And book reviews and the like are outside my purview. (Although some fan writers are excellent critics; many are represented in *SF Review*, mentioned earlier.) This narrows us down to the general essay or article, and these will fall into two large groups: sf-oriented and non-sf-oriented. I think it wiser to remain with at least a broadly sf (or fantasy) orientation, but you'll note our first column concerned itself with a subjective essay on Tolkien, the second with MacLuhanism and the social changes within and without our field, and this time the topic is the *Arabian Nights*. That's a pretty broad sweep.

Third—and this is implicit in the first two—I am looking for material of some relevancy to the readers of this magazine. Each article has met this test, I think, but certainly Anthony's essay in this issue does very much so. It provides an in-depth background look at the source material he used to write "Hasan," and gives us an unusual look at the way a writer's mind sometimes works in creating a novel. The article was written in 1966, and clearly reveals Anthony's inspiration for "Hasan" in his enthusiasm for the parent works. This is, of course, a rare pairing of lead-novel and column, and I can't guarantee it will happen again.

Next issue...? What appears in *Fantasy Fandom* next issue will depend on what I read in the fanzines in the next couple of months. I'm looking forward to finding out, myself.

So there it is: another issue of FANTASTIC put to bed. I'm proud of the changes I've been able to bring to the magazine in this short time, and pleased with your enthusiastic response to these changes. I'm looking forward to your reaction to this issue now, and to the renaissance I feel FANTASTIC is now enjoying.

—Ted White

NOW ON SALE *IN THE NOVEMBER AMAZING Phillip K. Dick's great novel A. LINCOLN SIMULACRUM, Alexei Panshin's A SENSE OF DIRECTION, Ray Russell's A WHOLE NEW BALL GAME, Greg Benford's SONS OF MAN.*

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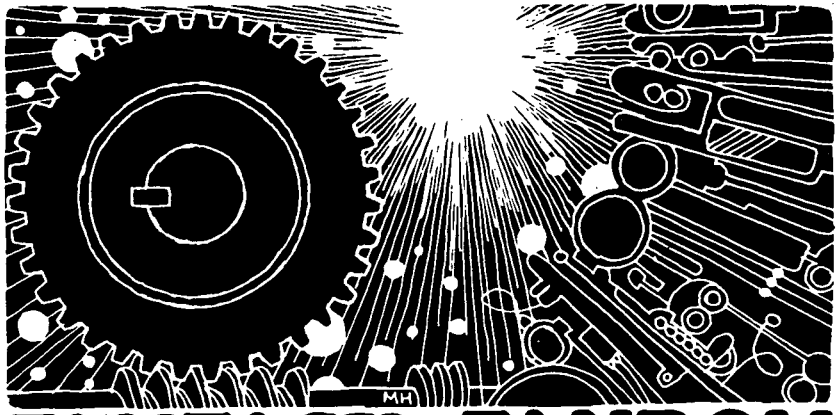

ALF LAYLAH WA LAYLAH
An essay on The Arabian Nights
by Piers Anthony

I

Many people have heard of the adventures of Ali Baba and the forty thieves, Aladdin and the magic lamp, and Sindbad the sailor. Fewer realize that such stories are parts of a larger framework known variously as *The Arabian Nights, A Thousand Nights and a Night*, or the stories of Sheherazade. Most readers have given up these childhood fantasies and graduated to adult fantasies by E.R. Eddison, T.H. White and J.R.R. Tolkein [1] which are more realistic and contain stronger medicine.

Let's put this on the right foot. If the foregoing is your conception of the true *Arabian Nights*, you are sadly misinformed. Neither Aladdin nor Ali Baba is a proper part of the Nights, and while Sindbad the Seaman does belong, he is not a charter member. Shahrazad (note spelling) is something more than a mere storyteller, as we shall see. And the Tales themselves are neither for children nor for the conservative reader; they constitute more than a million words of romance, adventure, sex, magic and philosophy ranging in mood from idyllic poetry to "How Abu Hasan brake Wind." Those who crave unadulterated fantasy and a realistic portrayal of an intriguing culture should graduate from the adventurous but essentially sexless worlds of the authors mentioned, to the fabulous saga of the unexpurgated Nights.

Come with me, for a moment, into the land of powerful kings, beautiful women, insidious enchantments and undeflowered nights. Picture a young king as he returns to his apartments unexpectedly and discovers his lovely wife in the most

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intimate embrace of a greasy kitchen slave. He promptly draws his sword and with one stroke creates four bodies from two, as any discriminating king would do. Somewhat chastened by the experience, however, he visits his older brother, Shahryar, who has more power, greater wealth, a better stocked harem and a better stacked wife—which wife, it develops, prefers to spend her afternoons with a better endowed slave. Shahryar is distressed when he learns of this; after verifying his brother's report by careful observation, he sets off with that brother on an expedition to locate, if possible, a greater cuckold than either of them has been.

They happen across an enormous jinni—one of those magical creatures who can move mountains or squeeze into little bottles, depending upon their mood—who carries from beneath the sea a fancy locked chest. The two kings disappear into a convenient tree, and the jinni, as luck would have it, settles down beneath the tree and opens his treasure. It turns out to be a beautiful woman—a damsel he stole away on her wedding night, so that none might tumble her but he. He lays his ugly head in her lap and falls asleep.

This is the opportunity she has been waiting for. She sets her lover's head on the ground and summons the two kings, who have not escaped her notice. When they demur, fearing the jinni, she informs that they will either do her bidding promptly or she will wake the jinni and tell him a little story ... about mashers in trees. They descend. Next, she makes them both a little proposition, which they are obliged to consider seriously on pain of the story mentioned before. After both, manfully, have bedded her, she compliments them on their performance and takes their signet rings as souvenirs of the occasion. She adds these to a string of 570 similar rings.

Shahryar, having learned something new about cuckoldry, decides that there is no way to preserve honor in a wife—except to kill her before she has opportunity to pursue her natural inclinations. He therefore returns to his kingdom, marries a lovely and highborn maiden, and has her executed on the following morning. He does this every night, until a shortage of eligible damsels developes. At last the clever daughter of his wazir,[2] Shahrazad, volunteers to marry the king. She arranges to tell him a story, during the wakeful period before the summons to the dawn prayer, which is still in progress when the night ends. Now understand: the Arabs didn't have much in the way of TV in those days (800 A.D.), and storytelling was a highly regarded occupation. No man of intelligence could bear to be denied the conclusion of an entertaining tale. What is the king to do? What *can* he do: he postpones the execution one day, in order to hear the end of the story.

This, to make a very long story very short, continues from night to night for a thousand nights—and a night. This is, in fact, the framework for the Arabian Nights, whose content we have not yet begun to discuss. Shahrazad, between the lines, gives birth to three beautiful sons, and is finally forgiven her sentence of execution. It is fortunate that the king never caught on to her alternate plan, in the event her tale-telling ploy failed: she was prepared to kill him, and thus end for certain the destruction of innocent maidens. "These learned and clever young ladies are very dangerous in the east," remarks a translator.[3]

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II

What was the true origin of this remarkable collection of stories? The individual Tales are too varied in nature and content to be the work of a single author, or even of a single period, however gallant it would seem to assign the entire credit to Shahrazad. They were assembled and recorded in their present form somewhere between the tenth and the sixteenth centuries A.D., but derive from scattered and ancient locales throughout Asia and the Arabian world. Scholars do not agree on their several origins, since the stories were circulated verbally for centuries before being recorded (which is the reason I date Shahrazad as I do, despite anachronism), and even then were subject to the blatant modifications and errors of copyists and editors.[4]

But if the pedigrees of individual tales are obscure, their unifying scheme is not. It is Arabic—and this is more significant than the casual reader might suppose.

When the Western Roman Empire collapsed, say about 400 A.D., barbarian tribes overran many parts of the Mediterranean world. The Franks moved into France, the Vandals and Goths into Spain, the Goths and Lombards into Italy, and so on. The Eastern Roman Empire persisted in Greece and Turkey, but it had problems of its own. Europe advanced from decadence to darkness.

By 600 the Eastern Roman Empire had expanded to dominate large sections of the old territory, including most of the coastline of Asia Minor and North Africa. It hardly seemed that any enduring threat existed from the unorganized desert nomads of the Arabian peninsula. Yet the downfall of the Eastern Romans was to be as dramatic as that of the Western, and it began in Arabia. By 700 the Arabs had burst forth and conquered not only the entire southern section of the Roman Empire, but also the civilized Sassanid Empire that bordered it in Mesopotamia, and were already reaching for Europe via Spain. By 800 the Arab Empire extended from southern France to western India, embracing more actual territory than the Roman Empire at its height.

How had such a thing come about? Briefly, through the Prophet Mohammed. The Bedouin tribesmen of central Arabia ate scorpions and beetles as delicacies, used camel urine as hair tonic, cared little for religion of any kind and were fiercely independent; but in 622 the cult of Mohammed, Islam, was growing, and within a decade it controlled much of the peninsula. Like Christianity, Islam was spread largely by virtue of the sword. Economic considerations drove the Arab marauders out of their parched homeland and into the rich surrounding territories, and though they did not at first urge religious conversion upon their new subjects, the favored status of True Believers inevitably led to this. Islam gave them unity and strength; they were not afraid to die, knowing the rewards awaiting in the afterlife, and thus became formidable warriors. Allah conquered.

The Arabs did not impose their culture upon their conquests. Instead, they avidly absorbed all that their civilized subjects had to offer, and thus benefitted themselves both economically and esthetically. A golden age was in the making—but in the name of Islam. More slowly, the Arabic language also dominated, creating another unifying bond that perhaps outweighed, historically, both those of conquest and religion. For communication is the

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lifeblood of civilization, and the common language encouraged greater organization and exchange of information.

It is interesting, however, to note the sequence: the peoples of Asia, Africa and Europe yielded first their politics, then their religion, and finally their several languages in favor of the offerings from Arabia. Does this indicate what is truly important to man—the things he gives up last?

In the year 800, Charlemagne was making history in Europe, carving out an empire that was to make his name the subject of grandiose legend for many centuries to follow. That same year another ruler was making history in the Arab world: Harun al-Rashid. Of the two, Harun may have been the better man; he controlled a far larger and more civilized empire and was himself more cultured. A commercial, scientific and literary renaissance was sponsored by his court, while, it is said, Charlemagne was learning to write his own name.

It is about the court of Harun al-Rashid that the Tales of the *Arabian Nights* center. He lends the flavor of his court to the entire collection, even though many of the stories concern other figures and other times. Thus these diverse stories are unified threefold, in the manner the Arabs unified the then civilized western world: they are Islamic in religion, Arabic in language, and their setting is the golden age of Harun al-Rashid.

The Nights are remarkable in one other respect: they are among the most accurate reflections of Arab history and culture available. There is generally some kernel truth to legend—but these tales offer a better guide to life in the ninth century than many supposedly factual texts. To read the *Arabian Nights* is to be educated ... far more than one anticipates.

III

What of the Tales themselves? What are they about, and what is their manner of presentation?

Generally, there are three types: the historical narratives, the beast fables, and the fairy tales. The histories, though containing fantastic elements and obscured by anachronisms introduced by later editing, offer a reasonable guide to the expansion and mechanisms of Islam. Actually, the great majority of the wordage of the Nights is of this type, whether intended historically or not. We see the Arab as he lives and works and loves and dreams, and only occasionally does the text become ribald or fantastic. (But what occasions!)

The beast fables are the oldest tales. They are usually brief and establish some moral point, much as Aesop's Fables, to which they may be ancestral. Animals are granted human minds and tongues, and are often mere vehicles for inconsequential bits of philosophy. One example will illustrate this type: herewith, entire, is Burton's rendition of "The Cat and the Crow."[5]

Once upon a time, a crow and a cat lived in brotherhood; and one day as they were together under a tree, behold, they spied a leopard making towards them, and they were not aware of his approach till he was close upon them. The crow at once flew up to the tree-top; but the cat abode confounded and said to the crow, "O my friend, hast thou no device to save me, even as all my hope is in thee?" Replied the crow, "Of very truth it behoveth bretheren, in case of need, to cast about for a device when peril overtaketh them,

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and how well saith the poet,

'A friend in need is he who, ever true
For thy well-doing would himself undo:
One who when Fortune gars us parting rue
Eictimeth self reunion to renew."

Now hard by that tree were shepherds with their dogs; so the crow flew towards them and smote the face of the earth with his wings, cawing and crying out. Furthermore he went up to one of the dogs and flapped his wings in his face and flew up a little way, whilst the dog ran after him thinking to catch him. Presently, one of the shepherds raised his head and saw the bird flying near the ground and alighting alternately; so he followed him, and the crow ceased not flying just high enough to save himself and to throw out the dogs; and yet tempting them to follow for the purpose of tearing him to pieces. But as soon as they came near him, he would fly up a little; and so at last he brought them to the tree, under which was the leopard. And when the dogs saw him they rushed upon him and he turned and fled. Now the leopard thought to eat the cat who was saved by the craft of his friend the crow. This story, O King, showeth that the friendship of the Brothers of Purity delivereth and saveth from difficulties and from falling into mortal dangers.

The fairy tales are the best known, and the examples usually selected for expurgation and presentation in juvenile format. The story of the Fisherman and the Jinni will be familiar, although the episode of the bottled Jinni is merely an introduction to the main tale, which is less familiar and more phenominal. Aladdin, perhaps the best known, is, as I have said, not a proper part of the Nights; but it is similar to them and may be considered typical.[6] Let's run through one of the major fantasies in detail: "The Tale of Kamar al-Zaman," otherwise known as "The Efreet's Beauty Contest."

A certain prince, Kamar al-Zaman, refused to marry, since he did not trust women. His father became angry at his adamance[7] and imprisoned him in a tower, leaving him to think over his attitude. Now the tower was inhabited by a jinniyah (female jinni), who spied Kamar sleeping and was enchanted by his handsome features. She flew off and gave the news to an associate, an ifrit[8] who protested that he had seen a certain Princess Budur, a hater of men, in China, who was even fairer than this lad. This resulted in a contest; they carried the sleeping damsel to the tower and placed her beside Kamar. But certain difficulties of comparison arose, since there are differences between male and female, and the argument continued. At last they woke Kamar, keeping Budur under sedation, and stood by invisibly to observe his reaction. The idea was to let the subjects decide the issue.

Kamar looked upon Budur and forgot about antifemininism:

And when Kamar al-Zaman saw the Lady Budur, daughter of King Ghayur, and her beauty and comeliness, she was sleeping clad in a shift of Venetian silk, without her petticoat-trousers, and wore on her head a kerchief embroidered with gold and set with stones of price: her ears were

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hung with twin earrings which shone like constellations and round her neck was a collar of union pearls, of size unique, past the competence of any King. When he saw this, his reason was confounded and natural heat began to stir in him; Allah awoke in him the desire of coition and he said to himself, "Whatso Allah willeth, that shall be, and what He willeth not shall never be!" So saying, he put out his hand, and, turning her over, loosed the collar of her chemise; then arose before his sight her bosom, with its breasts like double globes of ivory; whereat his inclination for her redoubled and he desired her with exceeding hot desire. He would have awakened her but she would not awake, for (the ifrit) had made her sleep heavy; so he shook her and moved her, saying, "O my beloved, awake and look on me; I am Kamar al-Zaman." But she awoke not, neither moved her head; whereupon he considered her case for a long hour and said to himself, "If I guess aright, this is the damsel to whom my father would have married me and, these three years past I have refused her; but Inshallah!—God willing—as soon as it is dawn, I will say to him, 'Marry me to her, that I may enjoy her.'"

So he restrained himself and did not molest her. He took her ring as a token and went back to sleep. "The young man must have been a demon of chastity," says a footnote. The jinniyah then awoke Budur, who also had a prompt change of heart. But she was unable to wake the prince, and

she opened the bosom of his shirt and bent over him and kissed him and put forth her hand to him, seeking somewhat that she might take as a token, but found nothing. Then she thrust her hand into his breast and, because of the smoothness of his body, it slipped down to his waist and thence to his naval and thence to his yard, whereupon her breast ached and her vitals quivered and lust was sore upon her, for that the desire of women is fiercer than the desire of men, and she was ashamed of her own shamelessness. Then she plucked his sealring from his finger, and put it on her own instead of the ring he had taken, and bussed his inner lips and hands, nor did she leave any part of him unkissed; after which she took him to her breast and embraced him and, laying one of her hands under his neck and the other under his armpit, nestled close to him and fell asleep by his side.

This little show won the bet for the jinniyah. They returned Budur to her home in China and forgot about the matter.

We pass over the painful scenes awaiting the lovers the following morning, though the Nights describe these in detail. After much trouble Kamar succeeded in locating and marrying Badur, and the two lived happily ever after ... for a good two months. Then Kamar happened to be led a merry chase by a bird, one morning during their journey to his home, and became, after just ten days, magically lost near a city a full year's march from the cities of Islam. There was nothing he could do except take service with a kind old gardner, while waiting for a ship to carry him back.

Budur, meanwhile, woke to find herself deserted. Realizing that it would be

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dangerous for her to admit she was alone, men being the brutes they are, she donned her husband's clothes and masqueraded as him [9] She continued the journey until she arrived at the Ebony city, whose king admired her masculine demeanor and offered to present the prince with his kingdom and beautiful daughter, provided the prince stay to rule the one and wed the other. Badur was on the spot; she had either to admit her subterfuge, which wouldn't be exactly healthy in the circumstances, or leave at once, which impoliteness might irritate the old king and bring destruction upon her anyway. Accordingly, she accepted the offer.

The marriage proceeded without a hitch ... until the nuptial night. Badur elected to say her prayers so late that the young bride fell asleep. But after a few nights of this things approached a crisis, since of course the princess reported in full detail to her eager parents, as good brides do. The king swore that if the wedding were not suitably consummated forthwith, he would take back his kingdom and settle fittingly with the prince who was too snobbish to do his duty by his bride. Badur finally confided her problem to the princess, telling her everything, and the girl had pity on her and agreed to set up a little show that would stall the denouement somewhat.[10]

Kamar, meanwhile, had discovered an underground vault filled with gold. He informed the old gardner, and they arranged to share the wealth. Kamar packed several bags of gold and covered the top of each with a layer of olives so that thieves would not comprehend their value. As luck would have it, the gardener fell ill when the ship arrived, and although Kamar got his bags loaded he missed the boat himself while he tended and finally buried the gardener.

Badur craved some olives, and bought the bags when the ship arrived at the Ebony City. But when she poured the olives into a plate, she discovered the gold, as well as a talisman her husband had taken. She sent the ship back to the gardens, and the crew siezed Kamar and hauled him back to the Ebony Isles. Badur recognized him, but did not see fit to make herself known, and Kamar failed to penetrate the disguise. He accepted service with this strange prince, and was rapidly elevated to high position. But he grew suspicious of such inexplicable generosity, and requested leave to depart. Badur instead made him a proposition which he, still thinking her to be male, found objectionable. She pursued this elaborate "joke" to the point of taking him into her bedroom and insisting upon satisfaction. She was much amused by his distress, but at last revealed her identity for a happy reunion. Kamar agreed to take the princess of the Ebony Isles for his second wife, and the three lived happily ever after ... for eighteen years.

Each queen had a beautiful son by Kamar, but as these boys grew to manhood each queen conceived a non-maternal passion for her sister-wife's son. Since both sons were honorable young men, this eventually lead to conflict. The queens, fearing exposure, got together and saved themselves by accusing the boys of the immoral advances. Kamar was furious, and ordered the execution of his sons; the the man assigned to do the job had compassion for them and set them free instead.

Whereupon is launched another major adventure involving the fortunes of each youth. In the end, all is for the best; but this should suffice to indicate the complex nature of these tales, which can span generations and contain subtales and sub-

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subtales. It can be a challenge to maintain one's conceptual equilibrium. Consider the story of the "Fisherman and the Jinni," mentioned before:

The hapless fisherman casts his net, hauls in a bottle, and inadvertently releases the jinni inside, who then declares he will kill his deliverer. The fisherman protests by telling the jinni the "Tale of the Wazir and the Sage Duban," intended to illustrate the danger in doing a disservice to a benefactor. Within this subtale are three sub-subs: "King Sindibad and his Falcoln," "The Husband and the Parrot," and "The Prince and the Ogress," afterwhich the narrative returns to the main subtale of the Wazir and the Sage. When that concludes, the story of the fisherman resumes. All that is still only the beginning of the main story, which involves colored talking fish, a prince whose lower half is stone, and a vindictive sorceress.

IV

There have been a number of translations of the Nights into English, and many adaptations from these, so that it is scarcely surprising that the average person has heard of the jinn, Sindbad and Allah. But my contention (and the point of this essay) is that few comprehend the scope and power of the original, unmutilated tales. Some conclusions can be drawn from comparative excerpts of different editions.

Return to my summary of the basic Nights framework. Remember how it all started—the king killing his faithless wife, only to discover that his brother's wife was even worse? Let's focus on that discovery, and see what several renditions have to say.

On hand is a paperback obviously slanted for children: *The Seven Voyages of Sindbad.*[11] This presents five tales in simple language, three of which are questionable for the reasons discussed in footnote 6. As for the episode: nothing. No mention is made of the Nights framework, and the Tales become merely isolated stories. So much for that.

On the other hand is a larger hardcover children's edition, *The Arabian Nights,*[12] which contains all the selections of the softcover and as many more. This does cover the setting, in a manner of speaking:

> *The king of Tartary being thus left alone, shut himself up in his apartment, and sat down at a window that looked into the garden. In this place, where he could see and not be seen, he soon became a witness of a circumstance which attracted the whole of his attention. A secret gate of the Sultan's palace suddenly opened, and there came out of it several persons, in the midst of whom walked the Sultana, who was easily distinguished from the rest by her majestic air. This princess, thinking that the King of Tartary was gone a-hunting with his brother the Sultan, came with her retinue near the windows of his apartment, and the prince heard her hold treasonable conversation with some of her companions.*

Treasonable conversation! This is grounds for the murder of a wife every day? One wonders whether the inculcation of such an idea into the mind of a child is not more dangerous than the straight sex would have been.

On a third hand: A larger, more adult-looking book, *The Arabian Nights' Entertainments,*[13] which contains a greater number of selections. This

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explains about the apartment overlooking the gardens, and "Schahzenan had from thence accidentally observed several interviews between that lady and a favored gallant." Well, at least we have a more sensible hint of that woman's little indiscretions; but *interviews?*

On another hand: the much larger, well known Lane translation[14] which runs about 700,000 words and is complete with copious footnotes. These are neatly assembled at the end of the volume and represent a most useful guide to Arabian custom and belief. Some notes are merely clarifications of particular words; others are complete essays as long as this one, or summaries of material omitted from the main text. Here, for the first time, verse appears, and we learn that this is a characteristic of the original Nights. But what does Mr. Lane have to say about the queen's gallant?

> *Now there were some windows in the King's palace commanding a view of his garden; and while his brother was looking out from one of these, a door of the palace was opened, and there came forth from it twenty females and twenty male black slaves; and the King's wife, who was distinguished by extraordinary beauty and elegance, accompanied them to a fountain, where they all disrobed themselves, and sat down together. The King's wife then called out, O Mes'ood! and immediately a black slave came to her, and embraced her, she doing the like. So also did the other slaves and the women; and all of them continued revelling together until the close of day. When Shah-Zeman beheld this spectacle, he said within himself, By Allah! my affliction is lighter than this!*

A footnote explains the meaning of the name "Mes'ood," ("Happy") while another delivers a lecture on the notions the Arabs have about female beauty—a matter they are most particular about, in the Nights.

Next comes the Mardrus-Mathers[15] translation, comprising about a million words but no footnotes. This is generally the sexiest of the editions available, with one qualification which I'll get to shortly.

> *Now there were in the King's palace certain windows that looked on to the garden, and, as King Shahzaman leaned there and looked out, the door of the palace opened and twenty women slaves with twenty men slaves came from it; and the wife of the King, his brother, was among them and walked there in all her bright beauty. When they came to the pool of a fountain they all undressed and mingled one with another. Suddenly, on the King's wife crying: 'O Masud! Ya Masud!', a gigantic negro ran towards her, embraced her, and, turning her upon her back, enjoyed her. At this signal, all the other men slaves did the same with the women and they continued thus a long while, not ceasing their kisses and embraces and goings in and the like until the approach of dawn.*

And finally, the notorious Burton translation,[16] a million and a half words comprising every numbered Night, pithy footnotes, and a terminal essay; this edition also has a supplementary million words or so to cover the tales like Ali Baba that are also of interest.

> *So King Shah Zaman passed his night in the palace and, next morning, when his brother had fared forth, he removed from his room*

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and sat him down at one of the lattice-windows overlooking the pleasure-grounds; and there he abode thinking with saddest thought over his wife's betrayal and burning sighs issued from his tortured breast. And as he continued in this case lo! a postern of the palace, which was carefully kept private, swung open and out of it came twenty slave girls surrounding his brother's wife who was wondrous fair, a model of beauty and comeliness and symmetry and perfect loveliness and who paced with the grace of a gazelle which panteth for the cooling stream. Thereupon Shah Zaman drew back from the window, but he kept the bevy in sight espying them from a place whence he could not be espied. They walked under the very lattice and advanced a little way into the garden till they came to a jetting fountain amiddlemost a great basin of water; then they stripped off their clothes and behold, ten of them were women, concubines of the King, and the other ten were white slaves. Then they all paired off, each with each; but the Queen, who was left alone, presently cried out in a loud voice, "Here to me, O my lord Saeed!" and then sprang with a drop-leap from one of the trees a big slobbering blackamoor with rolling eyes which showed the whites, a truly hideous sight. He walked boldly up to her and threw his arms round her neck while she embraced him as warmly; then he bussed her and winding his legs round hers, as a button-loop clasps a button, he threw her and enjoyed her. On like wise did the other slaves with the girls till all had satisfied their passions, and they ceased not from kissing and clipping, coupling and carousing till day began to wane; when the Mamelukes rose from the damsels' bosoms and the blackamoor slave dismounted from the Queen's breast; the men resumed their disguises and all, except the negro who swarmed up the tree, entered the palace and closed the postern-door as before.

This, then, is the full story. One now begins to understand why the king was so upset; the Arab racial prejudice and contempt of slaves is here superimposed upon its fanatic domination of royal women. Adultery was bad enough; but with a Negro slave...! Burton has a footnote explaining that debouched women prefer Negroes on account of the size of their parts; this is typical of his remarks on the text.

In general, the children's renditions are strictly for children, and are innocent and inaccurate. However, there is a case for expurgation, as may be understood when I admit that I edited out some of the grosser details in my discussion of the Kamar al-Zaman tale. The Nights at times lack artistry; the injection of the genital aspects of pederasty does not improve a pleasant romantic adventure, for example.

Lane, Mardrus-Mathers and Burton are the major translations I have found available in this country, though this is not to say these are the only or even the best ones. Lane edited his edition heavily; it was intended for the drawingroom table, and is suitable for it. He has omitted both objectionable and uninteresting material, and his footnotes are a boon to the serious reader and not obtrusive for the casual one. It is not expensive; I believe I bought my copy for five or six dollars.

The Mardrus-Mathers edition is another

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matter. This appears to be impurgated; that is, passages which are not unusual in other translations become sexual or scatological here. Since Burton made it a point to omit nothing, my suspicion is that the Frenchman sought to improve upon his text. About the only place this doesn't happen is in the passage I quoted for comparative purposes. This edition is attractively bound and is easy to read, but unsuitable both for scholars and those who are easily offended by sexuality. Those who are looking for entertainment rather than education will find this a delight, however. Dover sells it for $22.50.

Burton is for the scholar rather than the casual reader. He preserves everything in the original, whether of interest to English-speaking readers or not. Some tales are best described as tedious; others are pornographic. The great majority, however, are fine stylistic entertainment that duplicates the spirit of the Arabic original. Burton's footnotes are infamous;[17] they explore in detail things that many people don't even like to think about, such as the mechanisms of male and female castration, and in this respect do exceed the genital content of the Mardrus-Mathers edition. The Heritage Club has made available a handsome, illustrated three volume edition at a very low price, for Club members, which covers the 1001 Nights and the terminal essay; but for the complete translation which includes the Supplementary Nights, additional discussion, and quotes and refutations of early reviews of the series, it is necessary to go to the Burton Club editions. Some can be found in libraries, while a good reprint may be had for about $45.00 at one of the mail-order book distributors. This is well worth the price, for the serious reader.

—Piers Anthony

"Alf Laylah Wa Laylah" is an essay Piers Anthony wrote and published in Niekas *in 1966. It is reprinted here because of its relevance as background material for his novel, "Hasan," which begins in this issue. (The concluding instalment also contains a Postscript in which Anthony explains the fashion in which he adapted the original tale to his novel.)*

Niekas *is published several times a year by Ed Meskys (P.O. Box 233, Center Harbor, N.H. 03226), averages from sixty to over one hundred pages an issue, and costs 60¢ a copy. A large and sprawling publication,* Niekas *has upon occasion struck me as sloppily edited, but there is no doubt but that it publishes some of the best fantasy-oriented material—such as the above essay—to be found, and one can be almost certain of finding something to one's taste in its pages. —TW*

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1 Authors of **The Worm Ouroboros, The Once and Future King,** and **The Lord of the Rings,** respectively—as if you didn't know.

2 Wazir: prime minister, secretary of state, or some such

3 Evidently he lacked experience with western girls

4 Modern writers will sympathize

5 There is no copyright on this translation

6 I suppose I'd better explain. You see, the formal structure includes exactly 1,001 sections, or Nights, each set off and numbered. Sometimes several tales, like the fables, are covered in a single Night, while at other times a single Tale takes many nights. There is no room for a long story that hasn't been carefully fitted into this format. Aladdin and Ali Baba are not included in these numbered Nights—at least, not in authentic editions. They are merely fellow-travelers.

7 As well he might. Arabs are permitted four wives and innumerable concubines, and are encouraged to beget. The prince was setting a very bad example.

8 These spirits are given many names and ranks; it would take many thousands of words to clarify the entire range.

9 Remember, she resembled him in beauty, and the

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Arab clothing, boots, turban and veil (worn by men to prevent breathing desert dust) served as effective concealment.

10 The Arabs are conversant with such devices, which involve realistic exclamations and the smearing of pigeon's blood upon the nuptial sheet.

11 Gladys Davidson, **The Seven Voyages of Sindbad and Other Tales from the Arabian Nights**, New York: TAB Books, 1959; 156 pages

12 (No editor or translator listed), **The Arabian Nights**,, New York: Grosset & Dunlap, Inc., 1946; 337 pages

13 (No editor or translator listed), **The Thousand and One Nights or the Arabian Nights' Entertainments**, Philadelphia: Porter & Coates, (no date); 540 pages

14 Lane, Edward William, **The Arabian Nights' Entertainments—or The Thousand and One Nights**, New York: Tudor Publishing Co., 1927; 1260 pages

15 **The Book of the Thousand Nights and One Night**, translated into French by Dr. J.C. Mardrus and thence into English by Powys Mathers; London: Routledge & Kegan Paul Ltd., 1964 Distributed by Dover Publications, Inc. Four volumes, 2,300 pages

16 Burton, Richard F., **Alf Laylah wa Laylah, The Book of the Thousand Nights and a Night**; privately printed by the Burton Club. 16 volumes, about 6,000 pages

17 A note on footnotes: Burton lambasted Lane for the overuse of these, and for converting "Arabian Nights to Arabian Notes," but Burton himself is the most celebrated employer of this form. Lane used almost 1,500 notes; Burton almost 10,000. Lane had a single note exceeding 10,000 words; Burton had one over 80,000.[18] You will note that notes are used throughout the present essay; their nature, serious and facetious, is intended to suggest the flavor of Burtons'.

18 This is the Terminal Essay on the Nights, which in turn has footnotes; thus we have notes on a note!

(Continued from page 90)

"Glat," he thought. "Glat."

Identities flooded into his mind. He told them of what he had found and felt the sudden wave of relief, of joy ... of horror as they saw what he had done to keep alive until this moment.

The youth advanced upon him, oiled muscles rippling in the half-light of a torch that another youth carried. The light glistened on metal, the bronze short sword in the youth's hand.

Where had he...? Glat saw the answer in his mind. She had given it to him, the King's daughter in her treachery, and with it the simple ball of yarn that they unwound as they made their sure way through the endless corridors with their blind side branches.

"We can save you..." came the thought.

"No," Glat said tiredly. "It's too late for that."

He caught the youth's thought. "Three hands below the heart. Kill him. Not the heart but three hands below the heart."

In the single vital plexus that controlled his life, Glat saw.

"The King's palace," Glat thought. "Destroy it. Burn it. End this madness."

"The King's palace," he heard; *"and you . . . ?"*

"It's too late," he thought.

"Three hands below the heart," the boy thought and advanced with the sword outthrust.

Stupid clod of a man. Dull bloody barbarian, Glat thought, as the sword bit into his body.

He fell to the floor, his blood oozing from between his fingers, his great bull head raised as he watched the sword ascend again. Like the poor animals of the festival who so resembled him, he shook his head wondering at the death that descended on him.

While the great ship came from the clouds and left the palace of Minos in flames, the sword descended into his vitals.

"Monster," Theseus the hero yelled.

"Kill him, kill him," the girls yelled, seeing the blood of the Minotaur spill upon the damp stones.

—Thomas N. Scortia

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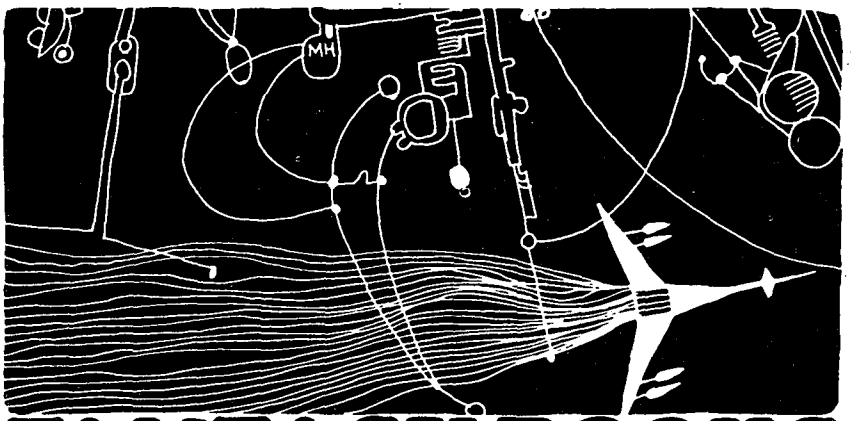

FANTASY BOOKS

Reviewed by Fritz Leiber

Harry Harrison early proved his power as a novelist with *Deathworld*. More recently he has given us many examples of his versatility. The latest is *Captive Universe*, Putnam, 1969, $4.50. This novel combines anthropological reconstruction with science fiction. A good part of it is a vivid and exciting picture of an Aztec civilization. There is interesting chapter-heading art by Harrison himself.

To the great disadvantage of libraries and collectors, many of the finest fantasy and science-fiction novels have in recent years appeared only as paperback originals and/or magazine serials. Now Walker and Company is remedying this serious defect by bringing out a series of handsome and sturdy hardcover books. Two titles alone show their excellent taste and good judgement: *A Case of Conscience*, by James Blish, and *The Space Merchants*, by Frederik Pohl and C. M. Kornbluth, both books at $4.50. Others are *Brain Wave*, by Poul Anderson, $4.50; *The Whole Man*, by John Brunner, $4.50; *Thorns*, by Robert Silverberg, $4.95; *The Watch Below*, by James White, $4.50; *The Midwich Cuckoos*, by John Wyndham, $4.50; and *Dragonflight*, by Anne McCaffrey, $4.95.

It is to be hoped that libraries and book lovers everywhere will take immediate advantage of this benign publishing phenomenon.

Highly controversial—because of its colorful, rough, and gutty language—among the new Walker novels is *Bug Jack Barron*, by Norman Spinrad, 1969, $5.95; hitherto published only in the British magazine "New Worlds," which was first banned because of it and then triumphantly vindicated and reinstated. It is proper that we take note of this book here, since—although its background is wincingly real and its setting America two decades from now—its theme is

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essentially fantasy: a Deal with the Devil, a particularly vicious bargain with a supreme vampire-fiend. (In this area of the story the "scientific extrapolation" strikes me as pure voodooism.)

First the language. I find objections to it ridiculous. Readers delighted in the invented juvenile-delinquent argot of *The Clockwork Orange*. Scholars take joy in investigating Shakespearian bawdry, Cockney rhyming slang, and Pachuko. Why in the name of Heaven should anyone take umbrage at learning how half of America talks behind the scenes? For make no mistake, the words and expressions in this book *are* the ones used in many a TV producer's office and around many a politicians' council table—not only the secret languages of junkies and jds, but also those of cops, athletes, and many respectable business men.

True, Spinrad spins out some of his paragraphs to vast length and employs the device of repetition with variations quite as much as Lovecraft ever did, even in *The Mountains of Madness*.

One social extrapolation is beautifully done and frighteningly plausible. The state of Mississippi elects a Black governor and legislature. White money and many Whites pull out. The new capitol, Evers, becomes exactly like one in a banana republic: a gorgeous airport and complex of state buildings surrounded by a sea of the most miserable sort of shacks.

There are a lot of hippy types in this book, but they are not coddled—the hero refers to them as Baby Bolsheviks. Yet the revolt of youth is interpreted with insight and compassion.

To find out more about *Bug Jack Barron*, read it.

Peter S. Beagle's delightful mythological tale *The Last Unicorn* was recently reviewed in this section by Alexei Panshin. Now Beagle pulls a quick change and shows what he can do with a modern setting and a merry graveyard theme in *A Fine and Private Place*, Ballantine Books, 1969, 95 cents.

Also not too long ago we reviewed Eric R. Eddison's fantasies in the grand manner: *The Worm Ouroboros* and also the second and third volumes of his Zimiamvian trilogy, *A Fish Dinner in Memison* and *Mistress of Mistresses*. Now Ballantine Books has issued the first volume of that trilogy, *The Mezentian Gate*, 1969, 95 cents. This book had not been fully written when Eddison died in 1945, yet it is in a sense complete: the author left full and literate outlines of unwritten chapters and these serve to carry along the story clearly.

Eddison writes with an Elizabethan richness of the wars and intrigues of imaginary Medieval kingdoms, while he carries romance to the point that Aphrodite is the chief goddess of his fictional world. She is incarnated in his chief feminine characters in various moods—wild, tender, capricious, mocking, loving, inspiring, cruel.

There are many ways of writing about sexual love, and here we get back to the question of language which we raised in connection with *Bug Jack Barron*. Let us confine ourselves to the mystique of the female bosom. Heinlein, for instance, would simply describe a woman as "pleasingly mammalian." Spinrad's hero "...saw uplift hemibra holding boobs not quite all *that* good." While Eddison writes of the Lady Fiorinda, "The low-cut bosom of her dress partly gave forth to view, as she so leaned forward, globed twin moons, plenilune at half eclipse, lovelier in their high Grecian pride than the moon of

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heaven, and holding in their warmed interspace (by patent of every Olympian untamed contour in her countenance above them) all sweets, all stings, all terrors, sense-furying over-weenings, doves, fire-worms, blindings, mandragoras, velvet-sheathed claws, lionesses' teeth: all beguilings: all incorruptibles: all keepings and waterings, returnings and reconcilements, performances and renewals of strength: all raging powers, from everlasting, of beauty and passion of love."—Fritz

—Fritz Leiber

TWO BOOKS ON TOLKIEN

reviewed by Fred Lerner

Tolkien: A Look Behind The Lord of the Rings, by Lin Carter; New York, Ballantine Books, 1969; 211 pp., paperback, 95¢.

Understanding Tolkien and The Lord of the Rings, by William Ready; New York, Paperback Library, 1969; 96 pp., paperback, 75¢.

The Tolkien fad has abated. One seldom sees a "Frodo Lives" button any more, except at a science fiction convention. The graffiti in the IRT station more often mentions Mark Rudd or Grayson Kirk than Sauron or Gandalf. But Tolkien has left his mark: *The Lord of the Rings* has not been forgotten. Allusions to the novel may be found in many contemporary books and articles; and several writers, both within and without the fantasy field, are showing a marked Tolkien influence. While Tolkien was a fad, the newsmagazines and Sunday supplements chronicled the business; but now that his work is beginning to exert a less sensational, but more permanent, influence on literature, more serious students are attempting to study the Tolkien phenomenon.

William Ready and Lin Carter both imply by their titles that they will explain *The Lord of the Rings*. Since the only man on Earth qualified for that task is Professor Tolkien, such an attempt would be either a triumph of misplaced ingenuity or a disastrous and presumptuous failure. Ready's book is a little of both; Carter avoids the issue.

The first third of Ready's skimpy book is an unauthorized biography of Tolkien, based on interviews with him and with former colleagues and students. Ready takes pains to explain the life of an Oxford don, and other aspects of British life with which Tolkien's American readers are mostly unfamiliar; and he quotes from many peoples' reminiscences of Tolkien.

After a brief *precis* of *The Hobbit* and *The Lord of the Rings*, Ready proceeds with his interpretation. "The Hobbit is Man's own daring admission of himself as he really is." He questions the reason Tolkien is so popular on the campus: "Maybe they would like to be Hobbits; if so, they were born too late: it's for Sauron or Strider now." The never-ending dilemma of man, his eternal need for vigilance against the Enemy, can be asserted only in fantasy: for in the real world petty day-to-day distractions keep our minds off the danger. Thus *The Lord of the Rings* is a warning, and few of its readers are heeding it.

There is some merit to Ready's view (if I am interpreting it correctly). Tolkien certainly is a conservative, and we are, as always, in an age of Good and Evil. It is fashionable to deny that Evil exists; this denial is Evil's strongest weapon. Perhaps Tolkien did write *The Lord of the Rings* to remind us that the Enemy is at

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the gates.

But Tolkien disclaims any such purpose, and who is to know a man's motives better than himself? The first part of Ready's book is useful—though it is painful to see a master of prose discussed in such abominable English—and the latter part is merely ingenious. Still, any writer who can write a sentence like: "Williams fascinated Lewis, above all, who used his friends almost like ice floes in a dark and deep stream, his life, that he had to cross," has no business writing about J. R. R. Tolkien.

After reading his articles about fandom ("Our Man in Fandom") in *IF*, I expected to find in Lin Carter's *Tolkien: A Look Behind The Lord of the Rings* another collection of dubious statements flippantly made. What I did not expect to find was an entertaining and informative account of the development of Heroic Fantasy as a literary *genre*, complete with a useful annotated bibliography. Carter has done for Heroic Fantasy what Sam Moskowitz has done for science fiction; while less detailed, his prose is also less pedantic in tone.

The first third of Carter's book reviews Tolkien's life story and the plot of *The Hobbit* and *The Lord of the Rings*. It takes Carter only eight pages to dispose of the idea that Tolkien was writing satire or allegory; he cites Professor Tolkien as authority, and proceeds to use the same unimpeachable source to define just what *The Lord of the Rings* is. Having concluded that it is "epic fantasy," Carter spends 100 pages exploring the *genre* from the classical epic to modern times. He points out possible sources for many names found in Tolkien's books, and then concludes with an all-too-brief look at some contemporary fantasy writers whose works show Tolkien's influence.

Carter carefully avoids reading theology or moral philosophy into Tolkien. He has read widely in heroic fantasy, and knows what he is talking about. What is needed now is a full-dress history of the *genre* for its own sake; Mr. Carter is the man to do it. (It should be noted that Lin Carter is presently supervising the reissuance of many fantasy classics in Ballantine's new "Adult Fantasy" series; each thus far as a new foreword by Mr. Carter.—TW)

—Fred Lerner

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...ACCORDING TO YOU

Letters intended for publication here should be addressed to *According to You*, c/o P.O. Box 73, Brooklyn, N.Y., 11232.

Dear Mr. White:

I am greatly in favor of the new editorial policy you have advanced in AMAZING and FANTASTIC, and expect the new features to add vigorous life to these magazines.

Judging from the fiction you have accepted (namely in the excellent June and July issues), your magazines are returning to the stage of publishing consistently good stories which marked the era under the editorship of Cele Goldsmith. I sympathize with the unfortunate necessity of reprints (albeit *good* reprints), but I feel you would not stand to lose many readers by raising your prices. Being much closer to the problem and having infinitely *(Well, let us say a* finite . . *—TW)* more experience in publishing, however, you may think differently.

The New Wavish material published by Mr. Malzberg wasn't all that bad, certainly not as bad as some letter-writers seem to think. My only complaint is that may were too short, a malady which seems to plague much of the New Wave magazine pieces. If you could get something on the order of "Riders of the Purple Wage" . . . Don't get me wrong, though— well-plotted and well-written short-shorts are always enjoyable. The February FANTASTIC was especially noteworthy in this respect.

But to return to *your* editorship . . .

"Emphyrio" is a Jack Vance story, and not much more need be said, save for adding that it is possibly his best. As you say, it will most likely be up for a Hugo, but there is going to be a great amount of stiff competition.

Mark Mumper
1227 Laurel St.,
Santa Cruz, California

There's one simple problem—and one which drives editors to an early grave: does the quality of a magazine have any influence upon its sales? During Cele Goldsmith's reign—which was, I agree, a strong improvement over that of the editors before her—sales slipped badly, ultimately leading to the decision of Ziff-Davis to sell the magazines. Now, will my

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efforts to give you a better FANTASTIC result in better sales? I certainly hope so, and you can be sure we will be watching the reports on these new issues very closely for hopeful signs.—TW

Dear Ted,

I just read your editorial in which you explain the abortion of *STELLAR*.

I wince at its loss.

Since I was one of the original subbers, that means I am due a refund—well, forget it. *I do not want a refund.*

The dream, the promise, and the grand effort have given me my money's worth. So, take me off your refund list . . . or at least mark it paid.

Paul I. Lewis
89-15 Parsons Blvd.
Jamaica, N.Y., 11432

Thanks, Paul. It was the generosity of people like yourself which got us started, and it was through no fault of yours that we stumbled. Your letter proves that sf people have a capacity for an idealism which the cynics have been telling us is long-dead.—TW

Dear Mr. White:

My error: I was in too much of a hurry when I picked up your August 1969 issue to check for reprints. I realize that the youngsters beginning their sf reading careers will enjoy them but I try to avoid them. After all, having read the very earliest magazines (loved that *WEIRD TALES)* in this field, reprints are redundant in my young life.

(Beginning this issue we've made your task simpler. Stick with us.—TW)

However, I consider Alexei Panshin's "What's Your Excuse?" worth the 50¢ I spent on your rag. This story has arrived at its proper time for publication. I hope more people become aware of its complete timeliness. I grant you it is not exactly sf, but there are such people who are slow of growth, not only physical but mental. Your college revolutionaries are slow mental growers and have not yet passed the mental age of 14. This age, if you recall, is excruciating in its awareness of its own shortcomings, its refusal to accept awareness wholesomely; reactions are violent and destructive and suicide in blind rage is more common than is realized. Suicide is the only alternative to violence against other people—do you realize the college suicide rate is up, up, up?

"The Briefing" by Randall Garrett had merit—the point is clear to those in the religious field and certain college and other intellectual types. Being a writer in the religious field, I am painfully aware of the lack of knowledge on the part of most people that Jesus spoke Aramaic.

I do book reviews on assignment and can take a lot of boring as these books are in the religious field. But "Emphyrio" is a prime example of just why sf is in trouble. Fritz Leiber made a comment about hard-core sex novels that applies fully as well to sf: it does not pay enough to make careful recasting, rewriting and polishing financially feasible. "Emphyrio" needs a lot of polishing. I found myself skipping whole passages of Vance where he apparently felt that people can make the same type of leaping around from abstraction to abstraction to meaning that he makes. Not all minds function that way. In fact, a majority of them don't. Even Ray Bradbury in his novel themed on "Something Evil This Way Comes" is guilty of the "it means what I say it means" even when he really isn't saying anything. However, what's meaning got to do with it when the pay per word is so low that you stuff up a story to get more

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money for it!

I wish sf writers would shed some of their "mystique" type writing. There is far too much of *guess what* embodied in their stories that doesn't have any sensible meaning or even sensible alternatives as in "The Lady and the Tiger". Personally, I thought a better ending to that story would be to have the hero (?) seize the nearest dagger and fall on it in utter frustration. But then, "great" literature (hah!) owes its greatness to its obscurity of meaning, ideas, etc.

I also realize full well that your editing task is not easy. Sorry about that but we all try to lift mountains for the sake of the things we love. I wish you success in lifting this particular mountain (magazine).

Rose Harper
4100 Raleigh St.
Denver, Colorado, 80212

One of the tasks of editing a magazine like FANTASTIC is that I read the stories herein not once, but at least three times between acceptance and final publication. That tends to test the mettle of even the best stories when the re-reading is done after such a short period of time as usually elapses between copyediting and galley-proofing. I don't believe it is necessary for me to leap to the defense of any story I've published here—I liked them all enough to buy it and publish them, but your tastes are not always going to dovetail with mine—but I can say that "Emphyrio" was not casually tossed off to earn a few cents a word. To begin with, accompanying the manuscript was something over one hundred and fifty pages of corrections, rewritten sections, and etc. To me this indicates a serious amount of "careful recasting, rewriting and polishing." Since Vance wrote the book first for Doubleday, which pays a royalty and not by the word, I very much doubt that he "stuffed up" the novel for more money. I considered it a rare opportunity to publish the novel first in these pages, and I remain convinced that it is one of Vance's best in recent years. If you disagree with me in that respect, that is your right, but in impugning Vance's motives as you have, I believe you have done him a serious disservice. (I trust the commentary in your penultimate paragraph was not directed at the conclusion of "Emphyrio," but rather to Stockton's weary would-be "classic".) —TW

Dear Mr. White:

Your editorial was the first I'd heard about the *STELLAR* project, and I feel like a man who tuned in just too late. It sounds like you had a marvelous thing going, and it is a real shame it never really got off the ground.

Still, if *STELLAR's* loss is FANTASTIC's gain, I guess I can't complain. Panshin's "What's Your Excuse" is a real gem, and ought to win *some* kind of award this year, even if it's just the Stephen Smith Award. I can see what you mean about categories, but this is ridiculous! You mean to say that not even *NEW WORLDS*, that bastion of the New Wave and "freedom" and all that would buy it? *(Apparently not.—TW)* If they won't buy a story this good, either they're printing nothing but the superlative best, or they aren't all they're cracked up to be. Judging from the issues I've seen, the latter is more likely.

But I can see why most sf magazines wouldn't want it. No rocketships. No ray guns. No alien menaces. Not even a hint of sword-and-sorcery. Just this story about a guy who is subtly *different*, and the

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bigotted way one guy reacts to him. It is really a shame that a story this good, this well-written had to go begging for so long, just because its *subject matter* didn't fit a standard category! Well, in any case we finally got to see it, and my hat's off to you, editor White, for having the sense to buy it. If you can give us just one story an issue which is as unclassifiable and as good, you'll have done the whole field a real service.

As for the rest of the magazine . . . yeah, I read it too. The type was terrible—but everybody's told you that already—and everything was continued to somewhere else, and I have the sneaking suspicion that the printer has this pet monkey locked in a closet who puts the magazine together, *but* . . .

It's getting better, better all the time. Now if you could just kick out the reprints and give us all new stories . . .

Stephen Smith
207 W. 80th St.
New York, N.Y.

A month ago we gave the monkey an office of his own, and upped his banana ration. This should result in physical improvements in the appearance of the magazine.—TW

(Continued from page 103)

hope none of *you* helped it pass."

"Children are like that, you know," Mrs. Roman said composedly, for Mrs. Youatt could scarcely challenge her authority on the subject of what children were like. "They have their mock Referendum every year, and it always passes."

"If that's so, then the teachers haven't been doing their jobs. It should be their first duty to instill a sense of responsibility. These children are all going to be voters one day."

Mrs. Roman smiled, wondering what Mrs. Youatt would have said if she'd known that Mrs. Roman had voted in favor of the Referendum herself. No one ever did ask *you* how *you* voted. It was assumed, out of politeness, that *you* had voted against the Referendum. It was always other people that voted Yes—old people, if you were young; Negroes, if you were white; the intellectuals, if you mistrusted intellect; the unemployed, if you had a job. But the *average* man and the *average* woman could be counted on to defeat the Referendum.

It came over Mrs. Roman then, with the force of revelation, like sunlight bursting out of a clouded sky, that she was no longer an average woman! What she had become instead she could not imagine, she would have to find out, but whatever it was there had to be something slightly dangerous about it, even sinister. She had discovered her secret identity, and yes....

Yes, it pleased her.

—Thomas M. Disch

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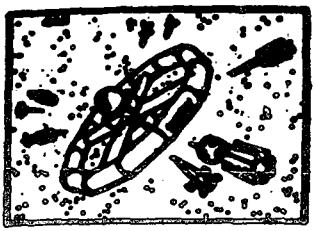

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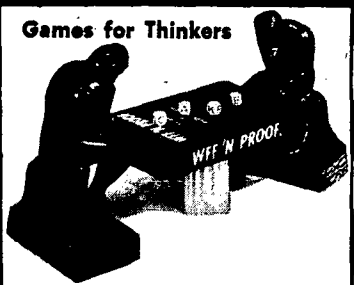

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